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His look was so haggard that  
she could not help crying out

*The Lerouge Affair*

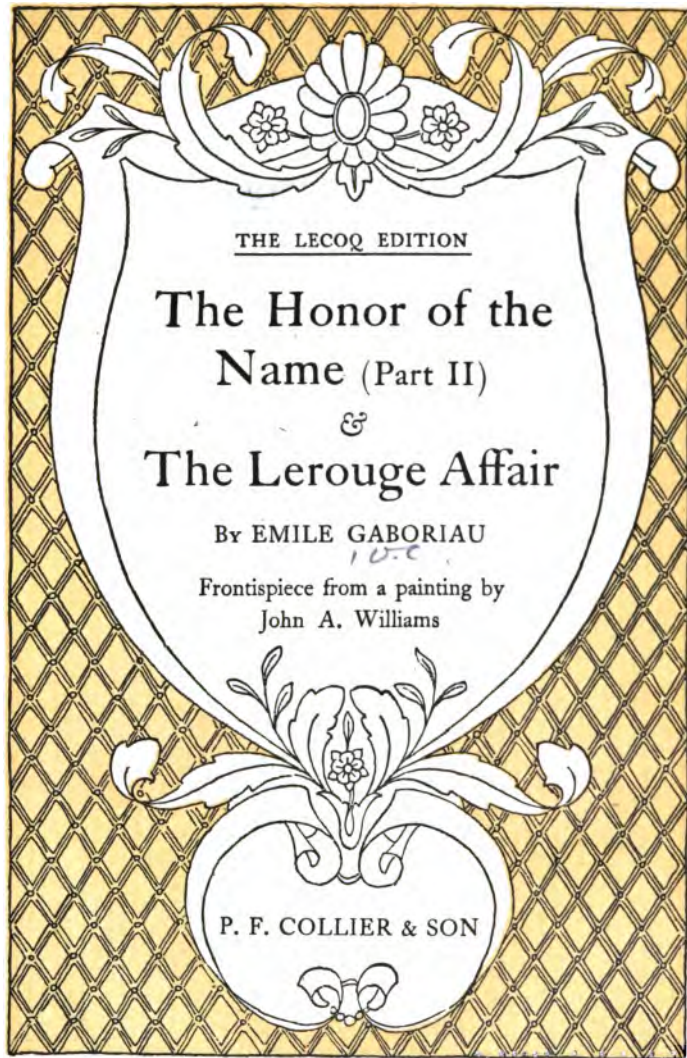
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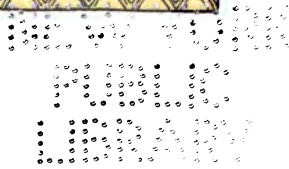
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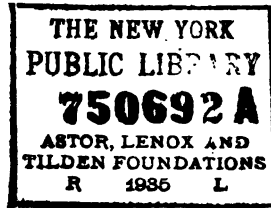
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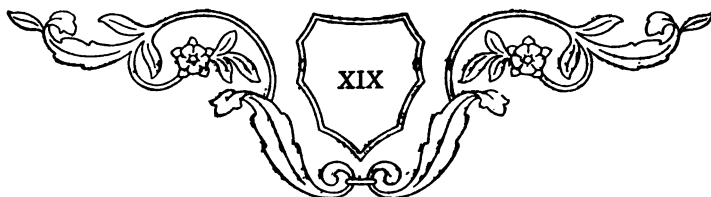






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## THE HONOR OF THE NAME

### PART II

"I KNOW what I am saying," rejoined Chanlouineau; and still fearful lest some spy might be concealed outside, he now came close to Marie-Anne and in a low voice spoke rapidly as follows: "I never believed in the success of this conspiracy, and when I sought for a weapon of defense in case of failure, the Marquis de Sairmeuse furnished it. When it became necessary to send out a circular, warning our accomplices of the date decided upon for the rising, I persuaded M. Martial to write a model. He suspected nothing. I told him it was for a wedding, and he did what I asked. This letter, which is now in my possession, is the rough draft of the circular we sent; and it is in the Marquis de Sairmeuse's handwriting. It is impossible for him to deny it. There is an erasure in every line, and every one would look at the letter as the handiwork of a man seeking to convey his real meaning in ambiguous phrases."

With these words Chanlouineau opened the envelope and showed her the famous letter he had dictated, in which the space for the date of the insurrection was left blank. "My dear friend, we are at last agreed, and the marriage is decided on, etc."

The light that had sparkled in Marie-Anne's eyes was suddenly bedimmed. "And you think that this letter can be of any use?" she inquired with evident discouragement.

"I don't *think* so!"

"But—"

With a gesture he interrupted her. "We must not lose time in discussion—listen to me. Of itself, this letter might be unimportant, but I have arranged matters in such a way that it will produce a powerful effect. I declared before the commission that the Marquis de Sairmeuse was one of the leaders of the movement. They laughed; and I read *incredulity* on all the judges' faces. But calumny is never without its effect."

When the Duc de Sairmeuse is about to receive a reward for his services, there will be enemies in plenty to remember and repeat my words. He knew this so well that he was greatly agitated, even while his colleagues sneered at my accusation."

"It's a great crime to charge a man falsely," murmured Marie-Anne with simple honesty.

"No doubt," rejoined Chanlouineau, "but I wish to save the baron, and I can not choose my means. As I knew that the marquis had been wounded, I declared that he was fighting against the troops by my side, and asked that he should be summoned before the tribunal; swearing that I had in my possession unquestionable proofs of his complicity."

"Did you say that the Marquis de Sairmeuse had been wounded?" inquired Marie-Anne.

Chanlouineau's face wore a look of intense astonishment. "What!" he exclaimed, "don't you know—?" Then after an instant's reflection: "Fool that I am!" he resumed. "After all, who could have told you what happened? However, you remember that while we were on our way to the Croix d'Arcy, after your father had rode on in advance, Maurice placed himself at the head of one division, and you walked beside him, while your brother Jean and myself stayed behind to urge the laggards forward. We were performing our duty conscientiously enough, when suddenly we heard the gallop of a horse behind us. 'We must know who is coming,' said Jean to me. So we paused. The horse soon reached us; we caught the bride and held him. Can you guess who the rider was? Why, Martial de Sairmeuse. It would be impossible to describe your brother's fury when he recognized the marquis. 'At last I find you, you wretched noble!' he exclaimed, 'and now we will settle our account! After reducing my father, who had just given you a fortune, to despair and penury, you tried to degrade my sister. I will have my revenge! Down, we must fight!'"

Marie-Anne could scarcely tell whether she were awake or dreaming. "What, my brother challenged the marquis!" she murmured; "is it possible?"

"Brave as the marquis may be," pursued Chanlouineau, "he did not seem inclined to accept the invitation. He stammered out something like this: 'You are mad—you are jesting—haven't we always been friends? What does all this mean?' Jean

ground his teeth in rage. 'This means that we have endured your insulting familiarity long enough,' he replied, 'and if you

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don't dismount and fight me fairly, I will blow your brains out!' Your brother, as he spoke, manipulated his pistol in so threatening a manner that the marquis jumped off his horse and addressing me: 'You see, Chanlouineau,' he said, 'I must fight a duel or submit to murder. If Jean kills me there is no more to be said—but if I kill him, what is to be done?' I told him he would be free to go off unmolested on condition that he gave me his word not to proceed to Montaignac before two o'clock. 'Then I accept the challenge,' said he; 'give me a weapon. I gave him my sword, your brother drew his, and they took their places in the middle of the highway.'

The young farmer paused to take breath, and then more slowly he resumed: "Marie-Anne, your father and I misjudged your brother. Poor Jean's appearance is terribly against him. His face indicates a treacherous, cowardly nature, his smile is cunning, and his eyes always shun yours. We distrusted him, but we should ask his forgiveness for having done so. A man who fights as I saw him fight deserves all our confidence. For this combat in the road, and in the darkness, was terrible. They attacked each other furiously, and at last Jean fell."

"Ah! my brother is dead!" exclaimed Marie-Anne.

"No," promptly replied Chanlouineau; "at least I have reason to hope not; and I know he has been well cared for. The duel had another witness, a man named Poignot, whom you must remember, as he was one of your father's tenants. He took Jean away with him, and promised me that he would conceal him and care for him. As for the marquis, he showed me that he was wounded as well, and then he remounted his horse, saying: 'What could I do? He would have it so.'"

Marie-Anne now understood everything. "Give me the letter," she said to Chanlouineau; "I will go to the duke. I will find some way of reaching him, and then God will guide me in the right course to pursue."

The noble-hearted young farmer calmly handed her the scrap of paper which might have been the means of his own salvation. "You must on no account allow the duke to suppose that you have the proof with which you threaten him about your person. He might be capable of any infamy under such circumstances. He will probably say at first that he can do nothing—that he sees no way to save the baron; but you must tell him that he must find a means if he does not wish this letter sent to Paris, to one of his enemies—"

He paused, for the bolt outside was being withdrawn. A moment later Corporal Bavois reappeared. "The half-hour expired ten minutes ago," said the old soldier sadly, "and I must obey my orders."

"Coming," replied Chanlouineau; "we have finished." And then handing Marie-Anne the second letter he had taken from his sleeve, "This is for you," he added. "You will read it when I am no more. Pray, pray, do not cry so! Be brave! You will soon be Maurice's wife. And when you are happy, think sometimes of the poor peasant who loved you so."

Marie-Anne could not utter a word, but she raised her face to his. "Ah! I dare not ask it!" he exclaimed. And for the first and only time in life he clasped her in his arms, and pressed his lips to her pallid cheek. "Now, good-by," he said once more. "Do not lose a moment. Good-by, forever!"

The prospect of capturing Lacheneur, the chief conspirator, had so excited the Marquis de Courtois that he had not been able to tear himself away from the citadel to go home to dinner. Stationed near the entrance of the dark corridor leading to Chanlouineau's cell, he watched Marie-Anne hasten away; but as he saw her go out into the twilight with a quick, alert step, he felt a sudden doubt concerning Chanlouineau's sincerity. "Can it be that this miserable peasant has deceived me?" thought he; and so strong was this new-born suspicion that he hastened after the young girl, determined to question her—to ascertain the truth—to arrest her even, if need be. But he no longer possessed the agility of youth, and when he reached the gateway the sentinel told him that Mademoiselle Lacheneur had already left the citadel. He rushed out after her, looked about on every side, but could see no trace of the nimble fugitive. Accordingly, he was constrained to return again, inwardly furious with himself for his own credulity. "Still, I can visit Chanlouineau," thought he, "and to-morrow will be time enough to summon this creature and question her."

"This creature" was, even then, hastening up the long, ill-paved street leading to the Hotel de France. Regardless of the inquisitive glances of the passers-by, she ran on, thinking only of shortening the terrible suspense which her friends at the hotel must be enduring. "All is not lost!" she exclaimed as she reentered the room where they were assembled.

"My God, Thou hast heard my prayers!" murmured the baroness. Then, suddenly seized by a horrible dread, she added:

"But do not try to deceive me. Are you not trying to comfort me with false hopes?"

"No! I am not deceiving you, madame. Chanlouineau has placed a weapon in my hands, which, I hope and believe, will place the Duc de Sairmeuse in our power. He only is omnipotent at Montagnac, and the only man who would oppose him, M. de Courtoirieu, is his friend. I believe that M. d'Escorval can be saved."

"Speak!" cried Maurice; "what must we do?"

"Pray and wait, Maurice; I must act alone in this matter, but be assured that I will do everything that is humanly possible. It is my duty to do so, for am I not the cause of all your misfortune?"

Absorbed in the thought of the task before her, Marie-Anne had failed to remark a stranger who had arrived during her absence—an old white-haired peasant.

The abbe now drew her attention to him. "Here is a courageous friend," said he, "who ever since morning has been searching for you everywhere, in order to give you some news of your father."

Marie-Anne could scarcely falter her gratitude. "Oh, you need not thank me," said the old peasant. "I said to myself: 'The poor girl must be terribly anxious, and I ought to relieve her of her misery.' So I came to tell you that M. Lacheneur is safe and well, except for a wound in the leg, which causes him considerable suffering, but which will be healed in a few weeks. My son-in-law, who was hunting yesterday in the mountains, met him near the frontier in company of two of his friends. By this time he must be in Piedmont, beyond the reach of the gendarmes."

"Let us hope now," said the abbe, "that we shall soon hear what has become of Jean."

"I know already," replied Marie-Anne, "that my brother has been badly wounded, but some kind friends are caring for him."

Maurice, the abbe, and the retired officers now surrounded the brave young girl. They wished to know what she was about to attempt, and to dissuade her from incurring useless danger. But she refused to reply to their pressing questions; and when they suggested accompanying her, or, at least, following her at a distance, she declared that she must go alone. "However, I shall be here again in a couple of hours," she said, "and then

I shall be able to tell you if there is anything else to be done." With these words she hastened away.

To obtain an audience of the Duc de Sairmeuse was certainly a difficult matter, as Maurice and the abbe had ascertained on the previous day. Besieged by weeping and heart-broken families, his grace had shut himself up securely, fearing, perhaps, that he might be moved by their entreaties. Marie-Anne was aware of this, but she was not at all anxious, for by employing the same word that Chanlouineau had used—that same word "revelation"—she was certain to obtain a hearing. When she reached the Duc de Sairmeuse's mansion she found three or four lackeys talking in front of the principal entrance.

"I am the daughter of M. Lacheneur," said she, speaking to one of them. "I must see the duke at once, on matters connected with the revolt."

"The duke is absent."

"I come to make a revelation."

The servant's manner suddenly changed. "In that case follow me, mademoiselle," said he.

She did follow him up the stairs and through two or three rooms. At last he opened a door and bade her enter; but, to her surprise, it was not the Duc de Sairmeuse who was in the room, but his son, Martial, who, was stretched upon a sofa, reading a paper by the light of a large candelabra. On perceiving Marie-Anne he sprang up, pale and agitated. "You here!" he stammered; and then, swiftly mastering his emotion, he bethought himself of the possible motive of such a visit: "Lacheneur must have been arrested," he continued, "and wishing to save him from the military commission you have thought of me. Thank you for doing so, dear Marie-Anne, thank you for your confidence in me. I will not abuse it. Be reassured. We will save your father, I promise you—I swear it. We will find a means, for he must be saved. I will have it so!" As he spoke his voice betrayed the passionate joy that was surging in his heart.

"My father has not been arrested," said Marie-Anne, coldly.

"Then," said Martial, with some hesitation—"Then it is Jean who is a prisoner."

"My brother is in safety. If he survives his wounds he will evade all attempts at capture."

The pale face of the Marquis de Sairmeuse turned a deep crimson. Marie-Anne's manner showed him that she was ac-

quainted with the duel. It would have been useless to try and deny it; still he endeavored to excuse himself. "It was Jean who challenged me," he said; "I tried to avoid fighting, and I only defended my life in fair combat, and with equal weapons—"

Marie-Anne interrupted him. "I do not reproach you, Monsieur le Marquis," she said, quietly.

"Ah! Marie-Anne, I am more severe than you. Jean was right to challenge me. I deserved his anger. He knew my guilty thoughts, of which you were ignorant. Oh! Marie-Anne, if I wronged you in thought it was because I did not know you. Now I know that you, above all others, are pure and chaste—"

He tried to take her hands, but she instantly repulsed him, and broke into a fit of passionate sobbing. Of all the blows she had received this last was most terrible. What shame and humiliation! Now, indeed, her cup of sorrow was filled to overflowing. "Chaste and pure!" he had said. Oh, the bitter mockery of those words!

But Martial misunderstood the meaning of her grief. "Your indignation is just," he resumed, with growing eagerness. "But if I have injured you even in thought, I now offer you reparation. I have been a fool—a miserable fool—for I love you; I love, and can love you only. I am the Marquis de Sairmeuse. I am wealthy. I entreat you, I implore you to be my wife."

Marie-Anne listened in utter bewilderment. But an hour before Chanlouineau in his cell cried aloud that he died for love of her, and now it was Martial, who avowed his willingness to sacrifice his ambition and his future for her sake. And the poor peasant condemned to death, and the son of the all-powerful Duc de Sairmeuse, had confessed their passions in almost the same words.

Martial paused, awaiting some reply—a word, a gesture. None came; and then with increased vehemence, "You are silent," he cried. "Do you question my sincerity? No, it is impossible! Then why this silence? Do you fear my father's opposition? You need not. I know how to gain his consent. Besides, what does his approbation matter to us? Have we any need of him? Am I not my own master? Am I not rich—immensely rich? I should be a miserable fool, a coward, if I hesitated between his stupid prejudices and the happiness of my life." He was evidently weighing all the possible objections, in order to answer and overrule them beforehand. "Is



it on account of your family that you hesitate?" he continued. "Your father and brother are pursued, and France is closed against them. But we will leave France, and they shall come and live near you. Jean will no longer dislike me when you are my wife. We will all live in England or in Italy. Now I am grateful for the fortune that will enable me to make your life a continual enchantment. I love you—and in the happiness and tender love which shall be yours in the future, I will make you forget all the bitterness of the past!"

Marie-Anne knew the Marquis de Sairmeuse well enough to understand the intensity of the love revealed by these astounding proposals. And for that very reason she hesitated to tell him that he had triumphed over his pride in vain. She was anxiously wondering to what extremity his wounded vanity would carry him, and if a refusal might not transform him into a bitter foe.

"Why do you not answer?" asked Martial, with evident anxiety.

She felt that she must reply, that she must speak, say something; and yet it was with intense reluctance that she at last unclosed her lips. "I am only a poor girl, Monsieur le Marquis," she murmured. "If I accepted your offer, you would regret it for ever."

"Never!"

"But you are no longer free. You have already plighted your troth. Mademoiselle Blanche de Courtornieu is your promised wife."

"Ah! say one word—only one—and this engagement which I detest shall be broken."

She was silent. It was evident that her mind was fully made up, and that she refused his offer.

"Do you hate me, then?" asked Martial, sadly.

If she had allowed herself to tell the whole truth, Marie-Anne would have answered "Yes"; for the Marquis de Sairmeuse did inspire her with almost insurmountable aversion. "I no more belong to myself than you belong to yourself," she faltered.

A gleam of hatred shone for a second in Martial's eyes. "Always Maurice!" said he.

"Always."

She expected an angry outburst, but he remained perfectly calm. "Then," said he, with a forced smile, "I must believe

this and other evidence. I must believe that you forced me to play a ridiculous part. Until now I doubted it."

Marie-Anne bowed her head, blushed with shame to the roots of her hair; still she made no attempt at denial. "I was not my own mistress," she stammered; "My father commanded and threatened, and I—I obeyed him."

"That matters little," he interrupted; "a pure minded young girl should not have acted so." This was the only reproach he allowed himself to utter, and he even regretted it, perhaps because he did not wish her to know how deeply he was wounded, perhaps because—as he afterward declared—he could not overcome his love for her. "Now," he resumed, "I understand your presence here. You come to ask mercy for M. d'Escorval."

"Not mercy, but justice. The baron is innocent."

Martial drew close to Marie-Anne, and lowering his voice: "If the father is innocent," he whispered, "then it is the son who is guilty."

She recoiled in terror. What! he knew the secret which the judges could not, or would not penetrate!

But seeing her anguish, he took pity on her. "Another reason," said he, "for attempting to save the baron! If his blood were shed upon the guillotine there would be an abyss between you and Maurice which neither of you could cross. So I will join my efforts to yours."

Blushing and embarrassed, Marie-Anne dared not thank him; for was she not about to requite his generosity by charging him with a complicity of which, as she well knew, he was innocent. Indeed, she would have by far preferred to find him angry and revengeful.

Just then a valet opened the door, and the Duc de Sairmeuse entered. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed, as he crossed the threshold, "I must confess that Chupin is an admirable hunter. Thanks to him—" He paused abruptly: he had not perceived Marie-Anne until now. "What! Lacheneur's daughter!" said he, with an air of intense surprise. "What does she want here?"

The decisive moment had come—the baron's life depended upon Marie-Anne's courage and address. Impressed by this weighty responsibility, she at once recovered all her presence of mind. "I have a revelation to sell to you, sir," she said, with a resolute air.

The duke looked at her with mingled wonder and curiosity;

then, laughing heartily, he threw himself on to the sofa, exclaiming: "Sell it, my pretty one—sell it! I can't speak of that until I am alone with you."

At a sign from his father, Martial left the room. "Now tell me what it is," said the duke.

She did not lose a moment. "You must have read the circular convening the conspirators," she began.

"Certainly; I have a dozen copies of it in my pocket."

"Who do you suppose wrote it?"

"Why, the elder D'Escorval, or your father."

"You are mistaken, sir; that letter was prepared by the Marquis de Sairmeuse, your son."

The duke sprang to his feet, his face purple with anger. "Zounds! girl! I advise you to bridle your tongue!" cried he.

"There is proof of what I assert; and the lady who sends me here," interrupted Marie-Anne, quite unabashed, "has the original of this circular in safe keeping. It is in the handwriting of Monsieur le Marquis, and I am obliged to tell you—"

She did not have time to complete her sentence, for the duke sprang to the door, and, in a voice of thunder, called his son. As soon as Martial entered the room his grace turned to Marie-Anne: "Now, repeat," said he, "repeat before my son what you have just said to me."

Boldly, with head erect, and in a clear, firm voice, Marie-Anne repeated her charge. She expected an indignant denial, a stinging taunt, or, at least, an angry interruption from the marquis; but he listened with a nonchalant air, and she almost believed she could read in his eyes an encouragement to proceed, coupled with a promise of protection.

"Well, what do you say to that?" imperiously asked the duke, when Marie-Anne had finished.

"First of all," replied Martial, lightly, "I should like to see this famous circular."

The duke handed him a copy. "Here—read it," said he.

Martial glanced over the paper, laughed heartily, and exclaimed: "A clever trick."

"What do you say?"

"I say that this Chanlouineau is a sly rascal. Who the devil would have thought the fellow so cunning to see his honest face? Another lesson to teach one not to trust in appearances."

In all his life the Duc de Sairmeuse had never received so

severe a shock. "So Chanlouineau was not lying, then," he ejaculated, in a choked, unnatural voice, "you *were* one of the instigators of this rebellion?"

Martial's brow bent as, in a tone of marked disdain, he slowly replied: "This is the fourth time that you have addressed that question to me, and for the fourth time I answer: 'No.' That should suffice for you. If the fancy had seized me to take part in this movement, I should frankly confess it. What possible reason could I have for concealing anything from you?"

"The facts!" interrupted the duke, in a frenzy of passion; "the facts!"

"Very well," rejoined Martial, in his usual indifferent tone; "the fact is that the original of this circular does exist, that it was written in my best hand on a very large sheet of very poor paper. I recollect that in trying to find appropriate expressions I erased and re-wrote several words. Did I date this writing? I think I did, but I could not swear to it."

"How do you reconcile this with your denials?" exclaimed M. de Sairmeuse.

"I can do this easily. Did I not tell you just now that Chanlouineau had made a tool of me?"

The duke no longer knew what to believe; but what exasperated him more than everything else was his son's imperturbable coolness. "You had much better confess that you were led into this by your mistress," he retorted, pointing at Marie-Anne.

"Mademoiselle Lacheneur is not my mistress," replied Martial, in an almost threatening tone. "Though it only rests with her to become the Marquise de Sairmeuse, if she chooses, tomorrow. But let us leave recriminations on one side, they can not further the progress of our business."

It was with difficulty that the duke checked another insulting rejoinder. However, he had not quite lost all reason. Trembling with suppressed rage, he walked round the room several times, and at last paused in front of Marie-Anne, who had remained standing in the same place, as motionless as a statue. "Come, my girl," said he, "give me the writing."

"It is not in my possession, sir."

"Where is it?"

"In the hands of a person who will only give it to you under certain conditions."

"Who is this person?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you."

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There was both admiration and jealousy in the look that Martial fixed upon Marie-Anne. He was amazed by her coolness and presence of mind. Ah! indeed powerful must be the passion that imparted such a ringing clearness to her voice, such brilliancy to her eyes, and such precision to her words!

"And if I should not accept the—the conditions, what then?" asked M. de Sairmeuse.

"In that case the writing will be utilized."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, sir, that early to-morrow morning a trusty messenger will start for Paris, with the view of submitting this document to certain persons who are not exactly friends of yours. He will show it to M. Laine, for example—or to the Duc de Richelieu; and he will, of course, explain to them its significance and value. Will this writing prove the Marquis de Sairmeuse's complicity? Yes, or no? Have you, or have you not, dared to condemn to death the unfortunate men who were only your son's tools?"

"Ah, you little wretch, you hussy, you little viper!" interrupted the duke in a passionate rage. "You want to drive me mad! Yes, you know that I have enemies and rivals who would gladly give anything for this execrable letter. And if they obtain it they will demand an investigation, and then farewell to the rewards due to my services. It will be shouted from the housetops that Chanlouineau, in the presence of the tribunal, declared that you, marquis, were his leader and his accomplice. You will be obliged to submit to the scrutiny of physicians, who, finding a freshly-healed wound, will require you to state how and where you received it, and why you concealed it. And then, of course, I shall be accused! It will be said I expedited matters in order to silence the voices raised against my son. Perhaps my enemies will even say that I secretly favored the insurrection. I shall be vilified in the newspapers. And remember that it is you, you alone, marquis, who have ruined the fortunes of our house, our brilliant prospects, in this foolish fashion. You pretend to believe in nothing, to doubt everything—you are cold, skeptical, disdainful. But only let a pretty woman make her appearance on the scene, and you grow as wild as a schoolboy, and you are ready to commit any act of folly. It is you that I am speaking to, marquis. Don't you hear me? Speak! what have you to say?"

Martial had listened to this tirade with unconcealed scorn,

and without even attempting to interrupt it. But now he slowly replied: "I think, sir, that if Mademoiselle Lacheneur *had* any doubts of the value of the document she possesses, she certainly can have them no longer."

This answer fell upon the duke's wrath like a bucket of iced water. He instantly realized his folly; and frightened by his own words, stood literally stupefied with astonishment.

Without deigning to speak any further to his father, the marquis turned to Marie-Anne. "Will you be kind enough to explain what is required in exchange for this letter?" he said.

"The life and liberty of M. d'Escorval."

The duke started as if he had received an electric shock. "Ah!" he exclaimed. "I knew they would ask for something that is impossible!" He sank back into an armchair; and his despair now seemed as deep as his frenzy had been violent. He hid his face in his hands, evidently seeking for some expedient. "Why didn't you come to me before judgment was pronounced?" he murmured. "Then, I could have done anything—now, my hands are bound. The commission has spoken, and the sentence must be executed—" He rose, and added in the tone of a man who is utterly resigned: "Decidedly, I should risk more in attempting to save the baron"—in his anxiety he gave M. d'Escorval his title—"a thousand times more than I have to fear from my enemies. So, mademoiselle"—he no longer said, "my good girl"—"you can utilize your document."

Having spoken, he was about to leave the room, when Martial detained him. "Think again before you decide," said the marquis. "Our situation is not without a precedent. Don't you remember that a few months ago the Count de Lavalette was condemned to death? How the king wished to pardon him, but the ministers had contrary views. No doubt his majesty was the master; still what did he do? He affected to remain deaf to all the supplications made on the prisoner's behalf. The scaffold was even erected, and yet Lavalette was saved! And no one was compromised—yes, a jailer lost his position; but he is living on his pension now."

Marie-Anne caught eagerly at the idea which Martial had so cleverly presented. "Yes," she exclaimed, "the Count de Lavalette was favored by royal connivance, and succeeded in making his escape."

The simplicity of the expedient, and the authority of the example, seemed to make a vivid impression on the duke. He

remained silent for a moment, but Marie-Anne fancied she could detect an expression of relief steal over his face. "Such an attempt would be very hazardous," he murmured; "yet, with care, and if one were sure that it would remain a secret—"

"Oh! the secret will be religiously kept, sir," interrupted Marie-Anne.

With a glance Martial recommended her to remain silent, then turning to his father, he said: "We can always consider this expedient, and calculate the consequences—that won't bind us. When is this sentence to be carried into effect?"

"To-morrow," replied the duke. Terrible as this curt answer seemed, it did not alarm Marie-Anne. She had perceived by the duke's acute anxiety that she had good grounds for hope and she was now aware that Martial would favor her designs.

"We have, then, only the night before us," resumed the marquis. "Fortunately, it is only half-past seven, and until ten o'clock my father can visit the citadel without exciting suspicion." He paused and seemed embarrassed. The fact was, he had just realized the existence of a difficulty which might thwart all his plans. "Have we any intelligent men in the citadel?" he murmured. "A jailer or a soldier's assistance is indispensable." Turning to his father, he abruptly asked him: "Have you any man whom one can trust?"

"I have three or four spies—they can be bought—"

"No! the wretch who betrays his comrade for a few sous would betray you for a few louis. We must have an honest man who sympathizes with Baron d'Escorval's opinions—an old soldier who fought under Napoleon, if possible."

"I know the man you require!" exclaimed Marie-Anne with sudden inspiration, and noticing Martial's surprise. "Yes, a man at the citadel."

"Take care," observed the marquis. "Remember he will have a great deal to risk, for should this be discovered the accomplices must be sacrificed."

"The man I speak of is the one you need. I will be responsible for him. His name is Bavois, and he is a corporal in the first company of grenadiers."

"Bavois," repeated Martial, as if to fix the name in his memory; "Bavois. Very well, I will confer with him. My father will find some pretext for having him summoned here."

"It is easy to find a pretext," rejoined Marie-Anne. "He

was left on guard at Escorval after the searching party left the house."

"That's capital," said Martial, walking toward his father's chair. "I suppose," he continued, addressing the duke, "that the baron has been separated from the other prisoners."

"Yes, he is alone, in a large, comfortable room, on the second floor of the corner tower."

"The corner tower!" said Martial, "is that the very tall one, built on the edge of the cliff, where the rock rises almost perpendicularly?"

"Precisely," answered M. de Sairmeuse, whose promptness plainly implied that he was ready to risk a good deal to enable the prisoner to escape.

"What kind of a window is there in the baron's room?" inquired Martial.

"Oh, a tolerably large one, with a double row of iron bars, securely riveted into the stone walls. It overlooks the precipice."

"The deuce! The bars can easily be cut through, but that precipice is a serious difficulty, and yet, in one respect, it is an advantage, for no sentinels are stationed there, are they?"

"No, never. Between the walls and the citadel and the edge of the rock there is barely standing room. The soldiers don't venture there even in the day time."

"There is one more important question. What is the distance from M. d'Escorval's window to the ground?"

"I should say it is about forty feet from the base of the tower."

"Good! And from the base of the tower to the foot of the cliff—how far is that?"

"I really scarcely know. However, I should think fully sixty feet."

"Ah, that's terribly high; but fortunately the baron is still pretty vigorous."

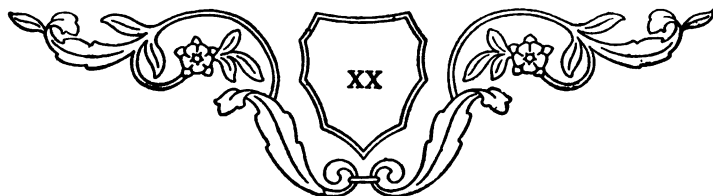
The duke was growing impatient. "Now," said he to his son, "will you be so kind as to explain your plan?"

"My plan is simplicity itself," replied Martial. "Sixty and forty are one hundred; so it is necessary to procure a hundred feet of strong rope. It will make a very large bundle; but no matter. I will twist it round me, wrap myself up in a large cloak, and accompany you to the citadel. You will send for Corporal Bavois, leave me alone with him in a quiet place; and I will explain our wishes to him."



The Duc de Sairmeuse shrugged his shoulders. "And how will you procure a hundred feet of rope at this hour in Montaignac? Will you go about from shop to shop? You might as well trumpet your project all over France at once."

"I shall attempt nothing of the kind. What I can't do, the friends of the D'Escorval family will do." Then seeing that the duke was about to offer some fresh objections, Martial earnestly added: "Pray don't forget the danger that threatens us, nor the little time that is left us. I have made a blunder, let me repair it." And turning to Marie-Anne: "You may consider the baron saved," he pursued; "but it is necessary for me to confer with one of his friends. Return at once to the Hotel de France and tell the cure to meet me on the Place d'Armes, where I shall go at once and wait for him."



**D**IRECTLY the Baron d'Escorval was arrested, although he was unarmed and although he had taken no part in the insurrection, he fully realized the fact that he was a lost man. He knew how hateful he was to the royalist party, and having made up his mind that he would have to die, he turned all his attention to the danger threatening his son. The unfortunate blunder he made in contradicting Chupin's evidence was due to his preoccupation, and he did not breathe freely until he saw Maurice led from the hall by the Abbe Midon and the friendly officers; for he feared that his son would be unable to restrain himself, that he would declare his guilt all to no purpose since the commission in its blind hate would never forgive the father, but rather satisfy its rancor by ordering the execution of the son as well. When Maurice was eventually got away, the baron became more composed, and with head erect, and steadfast eye, he listened to his sentence. In the confusion that ensued in removing the prisoners from the hall M. d'Escorval found himself beside Chanlouineau, who had begun his noisy lamentations. "Courage, my boy," he said indignantly at such apparent cowardice.

"Ah! it is easy to talk," whined the young farmer, who, seeing that he was momentarily unobserved, leaned toward the baron, and whispered: "It is for you that I am working. Save all your strength for to-night."

Chanlouineau's words and his burning glance surprised M. d'Escorval, but he attributed both to fear. When the guards took him back to his cell, he threw himself on to his pallet, and became absorbed in that vision of the last hour, which is at once the hope and despair of those who are about to die. He knew the terrible laws that govern a military commission. The next day—in a few hours—at dawn, perhaps, he would be taken from his cell, and placed in front of a squad of soldiers, an officer would lift his sword, and then all would be over. All over! ay, but what would become of his wife and son? His agony on thinking of those he loved was terrible. He was alone; he wept. But suddenly he started up, ashamed of his weakness. He must not allow these thoughts to unnerve him. Had he not already determined to meet death without flinching? Resolved to shake off this fit of melancholy, he walked round and round his cell, forcing his mind to occupy itself with material objects.

The room which had been allotted to him was very large. It had once communicated with an adjoining apartment, but the door had long since been walled up. The cement which held the stone together had crumbled away, leaving crevices through which one might look from one room into the other. M. d'Escorval mechanically applied his eye to one of these crevices. Perhaps he had a friend for a neighbor, some wretched man who was to share his fate. No. He could not see any one. He called, first in a whisper, and then louder; but no voice replied. "If I could only tear down this thin partition," he thought. He trembled, then shrugged his shoulders. And if he did, what then? He would only find himself in another apartment similar to his own, and communicating like his with a corridor full of guards, whose monotonous tramp he could plainly hear as they passed to and fro. What folly to think of escape! He knew that every possible precaution must have been taken to guard against it. Yes, he knew this, and yet he could not refrain from examining his window. Two rows of iron bars protected it. These were placed in such a way that it was impossible for him to protrude his head and see how far he was above the ground. The height, however, must be

considerable, judging from the extent of the view. The sun was setting; and through the violet haze the baron could discern an undulating line of hills, the culminating point of which must be the waste land of La Reche. The dark mass of foliage that he saw on the right was probably the forest of Sairmeuse. On the left, he divined rather than saw, nestling between the hills, the valley of the Oiselle and Escorval. Escorval, that lovely retreat where he had known such happiness, where he had hoped to die in peace. And remembering past times, and thinking of his vanished dreams, his eyes once more filled with tears. But he quickly dried them as he heard some one draw back the bolts securing the door of his room.

Two soldiers entered, one of whom carried a torch, while the other had with him one of those long baskets divided into compartments which are used in carrying meals to officers on guard. These men were evidently deeply moved, and yet, obeying a sentiment of instinctive delicacy, they affected a semblance of gaiety. "Here is your dinner, sir," said one soldier, "it ought to be good, since it comes from the commander's kitchen."

M. d'Escorval smiled sadly. Some attentions have a sinister significance coming from your jailer. Still, when he seated himself before the little table prepared for him, he found that he was really hungry. He ate with a relish, and was soon chatting quite cheerfully with the soldiers. "Always hope for the best, sir," said one of these worthy fellows. "Who knows? Stranger things have happened!"

When the baron had finished his meal, he asked for pen, ink, and paper, which were almost immediately brought to him. He found himself again alone; but his conversation with the soldiers had been of service, for his weakness had passed away, his self-possession had returned, and he could now reflect. He was surprised that he had heard nothing from his wife or son. Had they been refused admittance to the prison? No, that could not be; he could not imagine his judges sufficiently cruel to prevent him from pressing his wife and son to his heart, in a last embrace. Yet, how was it that neither the baroness nor Maurice had made an attempt to see him! Something must have prevented them from doing so. What could it be? He imagined the worst misfortunes. He saw his wife writhing in agony, perhaps dead. He pictured Maurice, wild with grief, on his knees at his mother's bedside. Still they might come yet,

for on consulting his watch, he found that it was only seven o'clock. But alas, he waited in vain. No one came. At last, he took up his pen, and was about to write, when he heard a bustle in the corridor outside. The clink of spurs resounded over the flagstones, and he heard the sharp clink of a musket as the sentinel presented arms. Trembling in spite of himself, the baron sprang up. "They have come at last!" he exclaimed.

But he was mistaken; the footsteps died away in the distance, and he reflected that this must have been some round of inspection. At the same moment, however, two objects, thrown through the little grated opening in the door of his cell, fell on to the floor in the middle of the room. M. d'Escorval caught them up. Somebody had thrown him two files. His first feeling was one of distrust. He knew that there were jailers who left no means untried to dishonor their prisoners before delivering them over to the executioner. Who had sent him these instruments of deliverance, a friend or an enemy? Chanlouineau's last words and the look that accompanied them recurred to his mind, perplexing him still more. He was standing with knitted brows, turning and returning the files in his hands, when he suddenly noticed on the floor a scrap of paper which at first had escaped his attention. He picked it up, unfolded it, and read: "Your friends are at work. Everything is prepared for your escape. Make haste and saw the bars of your window. Maurice and his mother embrace you. Hope, courage!"

Beneath these few lines was the letter M.

But the baron did not need this initial to feel assured, for he had at once recognized the Abbe Midon's handwriting. "Ah! he is a true friend," he murmured. "And this explains why neither my wife nor son come to visit me; and yet I doubted their energy—and was complaining of their neglect!" Intense joy filled his heart, he raised the letter that promised him life and liberty to his lips, and enthusiastically exclaimed: "To work! to work!"

He had chosen the finest of the two files, which were both well tempered, and was about to attack the bars, when he fancied he heard some one open the door of the next room. Some one had opened it, certainly, and had closed it again, but without locking it. The baron could hear this person moving cautiously about. What did it all mean? Were they incarcerating some fresh prisoner, or were they stationing a spy there?

Holding his breath and listening with the greatest attention, the baron now heard a singular sound, the cause of which it was quite impossible to explain. He stealthily advanced to the door that had been walled up, knelt down and peered through one of the crevices in the masonry. The sight that met his eyes amazed him. A man was standing in a corner of the room, and the baron could see the lower part of his body by the light of a large lantern which he had deposited on the floor at his feet. He was turning quickly round and round, thus unwinding a long rope which had been twined round his body as thread is wound about a bobbin. M. d'Escorval rubbed his eyes as if to assure himself that he was not dreaming. Evidently this rope was intended for him. It was to be attached to the broken bars. But how had this man succeeded in gaining admission to this room? Who could it be that enjoyed such liberty in the prison? He was not a soldier—or, at least, he did not wear a uniform. Unfortunately, the highest crevice was so situated that the baron could not see the upper part of the man's body; and despite all his efforts, he failed to distinguish the features of this friend—he judged him to be such—whose boldness verged on folly. Unable to resist his intense curiosity, M. d'Escorval was on the point of rapping against the wall to question him, when the door of the room where this man stood was impetuously thrown open. Another man entered, but his lineaments also were beyond the baron's range of vision. However, his voice could be heard quite plainly, and M. d'Escorval was seized with despair when this newcomer ejaculated in a tone of intense astonishment: "Good heavens! what are you about?"

"All is discovered!" thought the baron, growing sick at heart; while to his increased surprise the man he believed to be his friend calmly continued unwinding the rope, and quietly replied: "As you see, I am freeing myself from this burden, which I find extremely uncomfortable. There are at least sixty yards of it, I should think—and what a bundle it makes! I feared they would discover it under my cloak."

"And what are you going to do with all this rope?" inquired the newcomer.

"I am going to hand it to the Baron d'Escorval, to whom I have already given a file. He must make his escape to-night."

The scene was so improbable that the baron could not be-

lieve his own ears. "I can't be awake; I must be dreaming," he thought.

But the newcomer uttered a terrible oath, and, in an almost threatening tone, exclaimed: "We will see about that! If you have gone mad, thank God I still possess my reason! I will not permit—"

"Excuse me!" interrupted the other, coldly, "you will permit it." This is merely the result of your own—credulity. The time to say, 'I won't permit it,' was when Chanlouineau asked you to allow him to receive a visit from Mademoiselle Lacheneur. Do you know what that cunning fellow wanted? Simply to give Mademoiselle Lacheneur a letter of mine, so compromising in its nature that if it ever reaches the hands of a certain person of my acquaintance, my father and I will be obliged to reside in London for the future. Then good-by to all our projects of an alliance between our two families!" The newcomer heaved a mighty sigh, followed by a half angry, half sorrowful exclamation; but the man with the rope, without giving him any opportunity to reply, resumed: "You yourself, marquis, would no doubt be compromised. Were you not a chamberlain during Bonaparte's reign? Ah, marquis! how could a man of your experience, so subtle, penetrating, and acute, allow himself to be duped by a low, ignorant peasant?"

Now M. d'Escorval understood everything. He was not dreaming; it was the Marquis de Courtornieu and Martial de Sairmeuse who were talking on the other side of the wall. The former had been so crushed by Martial's revelation that he made no effort to oppose him. "And this terrible letter?" he groaned.

"Marie-Anne Lacheneur gave it to the Abbe Midon, who came to me and said: 'Either the baron will escape, or this letter will be taken to the Duc de Richelieu.' I voted for the baron's escape, I assure you. The abbe procured all that was necessary; he met me at a rendezvous I appointed in a quiet place; he coiled all this rope round my body, and here I am."

"Then you think that if the baron escapes they will give you back your letter?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"You deluded man! Why, as soon as the baron is safe, they will demand the life of another prisoner, with the same threats."

"By no means."

"You will see."

"I shall see nothing of the kind, for a very simple reason. I have the letter now in my pocket. The abbe gave it to me in exchange for my word of honor."

M. de Courtornieu uttered an ejaculation which showed that he considered the abbe to be an egregious fool. "What!" he exclaimed. "You hold the proof, and— But this is madness! Burn this wretched letter in your lantern, and let the baron go where his slumbers will be undisturbed."

Martial's silence betrayed something like stupefaction. "Ah! so that's what you would do?" he asked at last.

"Certainly—and without the slightest hesitation."

"Ah, well! I can't say that I quite congratulate you."

The sneer was so apparent that M. de Courtornieu was sorely tempted to make an angry reply. But he was not a man to yield to his first impulse—this ex-imperial chamberlain, now a *grand prévôt* under his Majesty King Louis XVIII. He reflected. Should he, on account of a sharp word, quarrel with Martial—with the only suitor who had ever pleased his daughter? A quarrel and he would be left without any prospect of a son-in-law! When would heaven send him such another? And how furious Blanche would be! He concluded to swallow the bitter pill; and it was in a tone of paternal indulgence that he remarked: "I see that you are very young, my dear Martial."

The baron was still kneeling beside the partition, holding his breath in an agony of suspense, and with his right ear against one of the crevices.

"You are only twenty, my dear Martial," pursued the Marquis de Courtornieu; "you are imbued with all the enthusiasm and generosity of youth. Complete your undertaking; I shall not oppose you; but remember that all may be discovered—and then—"

"Have no fear, sir, on that score," interrupted the young marquis; "I have taken every precaution. Did you see a single soldier in the corridor just now? No. That is because my father, at my request, has just assembled all the officers and guards together under pretext of ordering exceptional precautions. He is talking to them now. This gave me an opportunity to come here unobserved. No one will see me when I go out. Who, then, will dare suspect me of having any hand in the baron's escape?"

"If the baron escapes, justice will require to know who aided him."

Martial laughed. "If justice seeks to know, she will find a culprit of my providing. Go now; I have told you everything. I had but one person to fear—yourself. A trusty messenger requested you to join me here. You came; you know all, you have agreed to remain neutral. I am at ease, and the baron will be safe in Piedmont when the sun rises." He picked up his lantern, and added, gaily: "But let us go—my father can't harangue those soldiers forever."

"But you have not told me—" insisted M. de Courtornieu. "I will tell you everything, but not here. Come, come!"

They went out, locking the door behind them; and then the baron rose from his knees. All sorts of contradictory ideas, doubts, and conjectures filled his mind. What could this letter have contained? Why had not Chanlouineau used it to procure his own salvation? Who would have believed that Martial would be so faithful to a promise wrested from him by threats? But this was a time for action, not for reflection. The bars were heavy, and there were two rows of them. M. d'Escorval set to work. He had supposed that the task would be difficult, but, as he almost immediately discovered, it proved a thousand times more arduous than he had expected. It was the first time that he had ever worked with a file, and he did not know how to use it. His progress was despairingly slow. Nor was that all. Though he worked as cautiously as possible, each movement of the instrument across the iron caused a harsh, grating sound which made him tremble. What if some one overheard this noise? And it seemed to him impossible for it to escape notice, since he could plainly distinguish the measured tread of the guards, who had resumed their watch in the corridor. So slight was the result of his labors that at the end of twenty minutes he experienced a feeling of profound discouragement. At this rate, it would be impossible for him to sever the first bar before daybreak. What, then, was the use of spending his time in fruitless labor? Why mar the dignity of death by the disgrace of an unsuccessful effort to escape?

He was hesitating when footsteps approached his cell. At once he left the window and seated himself at the table. Almost directly afterward the door opened and a soldier entered; an officer who did not cross the threshold, remarking at the



same moment: "You have your instructions, corporal, keep a close watch. If the prisoner needs anything, call."

M. d'Escorval's heart throbbed almost to bursting. What was coming now? Had M. de Courtonieu's advice carried the day, or had Martial sent some one to assist him? But the door was scarcely closed when the corporal whispered: "We must not be dawdling here."

M. d'Escorval sprang from his chair. This man was a friend. Here was help and life.

"I am Bavois," continued the corporal. "Some one said to me just now: 'One of the emperor's friends is in danger; are you willing to lend him a helping hand?' I replied: 'Present,' and here I am."

This certainly was a brave fellow. The baron held out his hand, and in a voice trembling with emotion: "Thanks," said he; "thanks. What, you don't even know me, and yet you expose yourself to the greatest danger for my sake."

Bavois shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "Positively my old hide is no more precious than yours. If we don't succeed they will chop off our heads with the same ax. But we *shall* succeed. Now, let's stop talking and proceed to business."

As he spoke he drew from under his long overcoat a strong iron crowbar and a small vial of brandy, both of which he laid upon the bed. He then took the candle and passed it five or six times before the window.

"What are you doing?" inquired the baron in suspense.

"I am signaling to your friends that everything is progressing favorably. They are down there waiting for us; and see, they are now answering." The baron looked, and three times they both perceived a little flash of flame, such as is produced by burning a pinch of gunpowder.

"Now," said the corporal, "we are all right. Let us see what progress you have made with the bars."

"I have scarcely begun," murmured M. d'Escorval.

The corporal inspected the work. "You may indeed say that you have made no progress," said he; "but never mind, I was prenticed to a locksmith once, and I know how to handle a file." Then drawing the cork from the vial of brandy, he fastened it to the end of one of the files, and swathed the handle of the tool with a piece of damp linen. "That's what they call putting a stop on the instrument," he remarked, by way of explanation. Immediately afterward he made an energetic attack

on the bars, and it was at once evident that he had by no means exaggerated either his knowledge of the task, or the efficacy of his precautions for deadening the sound. The harsh grating which had so alarmed the baron was no longer heard, and Bavois, finding he had nothing more to dread from the keenest ears, now made preparations to shelter himself from observation. Suspicion would be at once aroused if the gratings in the door were covered over, so the corporal hit upon another expedient. Moving the little table to another part of the room, he stood the candlestick on it in such a position that the window remained entirely in shadow. Then he ordered the baron to sit down, and handing him a paper, said: "Now read aloud, without pausing for a minute, until you see me stop work."

By this method they might reasonably hope to deceive the guards outside in the corridor; some of whom, indeed, did come to the door and look in; but after a brief glance they walked away, and remarked to their companions: "We have just taken a look at the prisoner. He is very pale, and his eyes are glistening feverishly. He is reading aloud to divert his mind. Corporal Bavois is looking out of the window. It must be dull music for him."

They little suspected why the baron's eyes glistened in this feverish fashion; and had no idea that if he read aloud it was with the view of overpowering any suspicious sound which might result from Corporal Bavois's labor. The time passed on, and while the latter worked M. d'Escorval continued reading. He had completed the perusal of the entire paper, and was about to begin it again, when the old soldier, leaving the window, motioned him to stop.

"Half the task is completed," he said in a whisper. "The lower bars are cut."

"Ah! how can I ever repay you for your devotion!" murmured the baron.

"Hush! not a word!" interrupted Bavois. "If I escape with you, I can never return here; and I shan't know where to go, for the regiment, you see, is my only family. Ah, well! if you give me a home with you I shall be very well content." Thereupon he swallowed some of the brandy, and set to work again with renewed ardor.

He had cut one of the bars of the second row, when he was interrupted by M. d'Escorval, who, without pausing in his re-

newed perusal, was pulling him by the coat tails to attract attention. The corporal turned round at once. "What's up?" said he.

"I heard a singular noise just now in the adjoining room where the ropes are."

Honest Bavois muttered a terrible oath. "Do they intend to betray us?" he asked. "I risked my life, and they promised me fair play." He placed his ear against a crevice in the partition, and listened for a long while. Nothing, not the slightest sound could be detected. "It must have been some rat that you heard," he said at last. "Go on with your reading." And he turned to his work again.

This was the only interruption, and a little before four o'clock everything was ready. The bars were cut, and the ropes, which had been drawn through an opening in the wall, were coiled under the window. The decisive moment had come. Bavois took the counterpane from the bed, fastened it over the opening in the door, and filled up the keyhole. "Now," said he, in the same measured tone he would have used in instructing a recruit, "attention! sir, and obey the word of command."

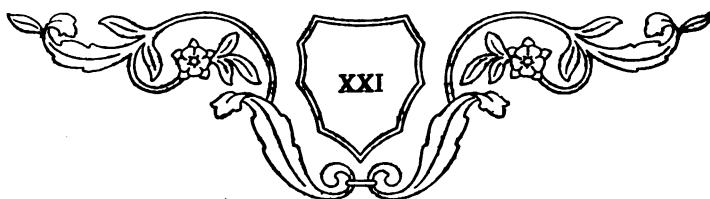
Then he calmly explained that the escape would consist of two distinct operations; first, one would have to gain the narrow platform at the base of the tower; next one must descend to the foot of the precipitous rock. The abbe, who understood this, had brought Martial two ropes; the one to be used in the descent of the precipice being considerably longer than the other. "I will fasten the shortest rope under your arms," said Bavois to the baron, "and I will let you down to the base of the tower. When you have reached it I will pass you the longer rope and the crowbar. Don't miss them. If we find ourselves without them on that narrow ledge of rock we shall either be compelled to deliver ourselves up, or throw ourselves down the precipice. I shan't be long in joining you. Are you ready?"

In reply M. d'Escorval lifted his arms, the rope was fastened securely about him, and he crawled through the window.

From above the height seemed immense. Below, on the barren fields surrounding the citadel, eight persons were waiting, silent, anxious, breathless with suspense. They were Madame d'Escorval and Maurice, Marie-Anne, the Abbe Midon, and four retired officers. There was no moon, but the night was

very clear, and they could see the tower plainly. Soon after four o'clock struck from the church steeples, they perceived a dark object glide slowly down the side of the tower—this was the baron. A short interval and then another form followed rapidly—this was Bavois. Half of the perilous journey was accomplished. The watchers below could see the two figures moving about on the narrow platform. The corporal and the baron were exerting all their strength to fix the crowbar securely in a crevice of the rock. Suddenly one of the figures stepped forward and glided gently down the side of the precipice. It could be none other than M. d'Escorval. Transported with happiness, his wife sprang forward with open arms to receive him. Alas! at that same moment a terrible cry rent the still night air.

M. d'Escorval was falling from a height of fifty feet; he was being hurled to the foot of the precipice. The rope had parted. Had it broken naturally? Maurice examined it; and then with a vow of vengeance exclaimed that they had been betrayed—that their enemy had arranged to deliver only a dead body into their hands—that the rope had been foully tampered with, intentionally cut with a knife beforehand!



**F**ATHER CHUPIN, the false witness and the crafty spy, had refrained from sleeping and almost from drinking ever since that unfortunate morning when the Duc de Sairmeuse affixed to the walls of Montaignac the decree in which he promised twenty thousand francs to the person who delivered up Lacheneur, dead or alive. "Twenty thousand francs," muttered the old rascal gloomily; "twenty sacks with a hundred golden pistoles in each! Ah! if I could only discover this Lacheneur, even if he were dead and buried a hundred feet under ground, I should gain the reward."

He cared nothing for the shame which such a feat would entail. His sole thought was the reward—the blood-money. Unfortunately for his greed he had nothing whatever to guide

him in his researches; no clue, however vague. All that was known in Montaignac was that Lacheneur's horse had been killed at the Croix d'Arcy. But no one could say whether Lacheneur himself had been wounded, or whether he had escaped from the fray uninjured. Had he gained the frontier? Or had he found an asylum in some friend's house? Chupin was thus hungering for the price of blood, when, on the day of the baron's trial, as he was returning from the citadel, after giving his evidence, he chanced to enter a wine-shop. He was indulging in a strong potation when he suddenly heard a peasant near him mention Lacheneur's name in a low voice. This peasant was an old man, who sat at an adjoining table, emptying a bottle of wine in a friend's company, and he was telling the latter that he had come to Montaignac on purpose to give Mademoiselle Lacheneur some news of her father. He said that his son-in-law had met the chief conspirator in the mountains which separate the arrondissement of Montaignac from Savoy, and he even mentioned the exact place of meeting, which was near Saint Pavin-des-Grottes, a tiny village of only a few houses. Certainly the worthy fellow did not think he was committing a dangerous indiscretion, for in his opinion Lacheneur had already crossed the frontier, and put himself out of danger. But in this surmise he was grievously mistaken.

The frontier bordering on Savoy was guarded by soldiers, who had received orders to prevent any of the conspirators passing into Italian territory. And even if Piedmont was gained, it seemed likely that the Italian authorities would themselves arrest the fugitive rebels, and hand them over to their judges. Chupin was aware of all this, and resolved to act at once. He threw a coin on the counter, and without waiting for his change, rushed back to the citadel, and asked a sergeant at the gate for pen and paper. Writing was for him usually a most laborious task, but to-day it only took him a moment to pen these lines:

"I know Lacheneur's retreat, and beg monseigneur to order some mounted soldiers to accompany me, so that we may capture him.  
CHUPIN."

This letter was given to one of the guards, with a request to take it to the Duc de Sairmeuse, who was then presiding over the military commission. Five minutes later the soldier

returned with the same note, on the margin of which the duke had written an order, placing a lieutenant and eight men of the Montaignac chasseurs, who could be relied upon, at Chupin's disposal. The old spy also asked the loan of a horse for his own use, and this was granted him; and the party then started off at once in the direction of St. Pavin.

When, at the finish of the final stand made by the insurgents at the Croix d'Arcy, Lacheneur's horse received a bayonet wound in the chest, and reared and fell, burying its rider underneath, the latter lost consciousness, and it was not till some hours later that, restored by the fresh morning air, he regained his senses and was able to look about him. All he perceived was a couple of dead bodies lying some little distance off. It was a terrible moment, and in his soul he cursed the fate which had left him still alive. Had he been armed, he would no doubt have put an end to the mental tortures he was suffering by suicide—but then he had no weapon. So he must resign himself to life. Perhaps, too, the voice of honor whispered that it was cowardice to strive to escape responsibility by self-inflicted death. At last he endeavored to draw himself from under his horse, which proved no easy task, as his foot was still in the stirrup, and his limbs were so cramped that he could scarcely move them. Finally, however, he succeeded in freeing himself, and, on examination, discovered that he had only one wound, inflicted by a bayonet thrust, in the left leg. It caused him considerable pain, and he was trying to bandage it with his handkerchief when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. He had no time for reflection; but at once darted into the forest that lies to the left of the Croix d'Arcy. The troops were returning to Montaignac after pursuing the rebels for more than three miles. There were some two hundred soldiers, who were bringing back a score of peasants as prisoners. Crouching behind an oak tree scarcely fifteen paces from the road, Lacheneur recognized several of the captives in the gray light of dawn. It was only by the merest chance that he escaped discovery; and he fully realized how difficult it would be for him to gain the frontier without falling into the hands of the many detachments of soldiery, who were doubtless scouring the country in every direction.

Still he did not despair. The mountains lay only two leagues away; and he firmly believed that he would be able to successfully elude his pursuers could he only gain the shelter of the

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hills. He began his journey courageously, but soon he was obliged to admit that he had greatly overestimated his strength, which was well-nigh quite exhausted by the excessive labor and excitement of the past few days, coupled with the loss of blood occasioned by his wound. He tore up a stake in an adjacent vineyard, and using it as a staff, slowly dragged himself along, keeping in the shelter of the woods as much as possible, and creeping beside the hedges and in the ditches whenever he was obliged to cross an open space. Physical suffering and mental anguish were soon supplemented by the agony of hunger. He had eaten nothing for thirty hours, and felt terribly weak from lack of nourishment. Soon the craving for food became so intolerable that he was willing to brave anything to appease it. At last he perceived the thatched roofs of a little hamlet. He was going forward, decided to enter the first house and ask for food; the outskirts of the village were reached, and a cottage stood within a few yards, when suddenly he heard the rolling of a drum. Surmising that a party of troops was near at hand, he instinctively hid himself behind a wall. But the drum proved to be that of a public crier, summoning the village folk together; and soon he could hear a clear, penetrating voice reciting the following words: "This is to give notice that the authorities of Montaignac promise a reward of twenty thousand francs to whosoever delivers up the man known as Lacheneur, dead or alive. Dead or alive! Understand, that if he be dead, the compensation will be the same; twenty thousand francs! to be paid in gold. God save the king."

Then came another roll of the drum. But with a bound, Lacheneur had already risen; and though he had believed himself utterly exhausted, he now found superhuman strength to fly. A price had been set upon his head; and the circumstance awakened in his breast the frenzy that renders a hunted beast so dangerous. In all the villages around him he fancied he could hear the rolling of drums, and the voices of criers proclaiming him an outlaw. Go where he would now, he was a tempting bait offered to treason and cupidity. Whom could he dare confide in? Whom could he ask for shelter? And even if he were dead, he would still be worth a fortune. Though he might die from lack of nourishment and exhaustion under a bush by the wayside, yet his emaciated body would still be worth twenty thousand francs. And the man who found his corpse would not give it burial. He would place it on his cart

and convey it to Montaignac, present it to the authorities, and say: "Here is Lacheneur's body—give me the reward."

How long and by what paths he pursued his flight he could not tell. But several hours afterward, while he was wandering through the wooded hills of Charves, he espied two men, who sprang up and fled at his approach. In a terrible voice he called after them: "Eh! you fellows! do you each want to earn a thousand pistoles? I am Lacheneur."

They paused when they recognized him, and Lacheneur saw that they were two of his former followers, both of them well-to-do farmers, whom it had been difficult to induce to join in the revolt. They happened to have with them some bread and a little brandy, and they gave both to the famished man. They sat down beside him on the grass, and while he was eating they related their misfortunes. Their connection with the conspiracy had been discovered, and soldiers were hunting for them, but they hoped to reach Italy with the help of a guide who was waiting for them at an appointed place.

Lacheneur held out his hand. "Then I am saved," said he. "Weak and wounded as I am, I should have perished all alone."

But the two farmers did not take the hand he offered. "We ought to leave you," said the younger man gloomily, "for you are the cause of our misfortunes. You deceived us, Monsieur Lacheneur."

The leader of the revolt dared not protest; the reproach was so well deserved. However, the other farmer gave his companion a peculiar glance and suggested that they might let Lacheneur accompany them all the same. So they walked on all three together, and that same evening, after nine hours' journey through the mountains, they crossed the frontier. But, in the mean while, many and bitter had been the reproaches they had exchanged. On being closely questioned by his companions, Lacheneur, exhausted both in mind and body, finally admitted the insincerity of his promises, by means of which he had inflamed his followers' zeal. He acknowledged that he had spread the report that Marie-Louise and the young king of Rome were concealed in Montaignac, and that it was a gross falsehood. He confessed that he had given the signal for the revolt without any chance of success, and without any precise means of action, leaving everything to chance. In short, he confessed that nothing was real except the hatred, the bitter hatred he felt against the Sairmeuse family. A dozen times



at least during this terrible confession the peasants who accompanied him were on the point of hurling him over the precipice by the banks of which they walked. "So it was to gratify his own spite," they thought, quivering with rage, "that he set every one fighting and killing each other—that he has ruined us and driven us into exile. We'll see if he is to escape unpunished."

After crossing the frontier the fugitives repaired to the first hostelry they could find, a lonely inn, a league or so from the little village of Saint-Jean-de-Coche, and kept by a man named Balstain. It was past midnight when they rapped, but, despite the lateness of the hour, they were admitted, and ordered supper. Lacheneur, weak from loss of blood, and exhausted by his long tramp, went off to bed, however, without eating. He threw himself on to a pallet in an adjoining room and soon fell asleep. For the first time since meeting him, the two farmers now found an opportunity to talk in private. The same idea had occurred to both of them. They believed that by delivering Lacheneur up to the authorities, they might secure pardon for themselves. Neither of them would have consented to receive a single sou of the blood-money, but they did not consider there would be any disgrace in exchanging their own lives and liberty for Lacheneur's, especially as he had so deceived them. Eventually they decided to go to Saint-Jean-de-Coche directly supper was over and inform the Piedmontese guards.

But they reckoned without their host. They had spoken loud enough to be overheard by Balstain, the innkeeper, who during the day had been told of the magnificent reward promised for Lacheneur's capture. On learning that the exhausted man, now quietly sleeping under his roof, was the famous conspirator, he was seized with a sudden thirst for gold, and whispering a word to his wife he darted through the window of a back room to run and fetch the carabineers, as the Italian gendarmes are termed. He had been gone half an hour or so when the two peasants left the house, for they had drunk heavily with the view of mustering sufficient courage to carry their purpose into effect. They closed the door so violently on going out that Lacheneur woke up. He rose from his bed and came into the front room, where he found the innkeeper's wife alone. "Where are my friends?" he asked anxiously. "And where is your husband?"

Moved by sympathy, the woman tried to falter some excuse,

but finding none, she threw herself at his feet, exclaiming: "Fly, save yourself—you are betrayed!"

Lacheneur rushed back into his bedroom, trying to find a weapon with which to defend himself, or a mode of egress by which he could escape unperceived. He had thought they might abandon him, but betray him—no, never! "Who has sold me?" he asked in an agitated voice.

"Your friends—the two men who supped at that table."

"That's impossible!" he retorted: for he ignored his comrades' designs and hopes; and could not, would not, believe them capable of betraying him for lucre.

"But," pleaded the innkeeper's wife, still on her knees before him, "they have just started for Saint-Jean-de-Coche, where they mean to denounce you. I heard them say that your life would purchase theirs. They certainly mean to fetch the carabineers; and, alas, must I also say that my own husband has gone to betray you."

Lacheneur understood everything now! And this supreme misfortune, after all the misery he had endured, quite prostrated him. Tears gushed from his eyes, and, sinking on to a chair, he murmured: "Let them come; I am ready for them. No, I will not stir from here! My miserable life is not worth such a struggle."

But the landlady rose, and grasping at his clothing, shook and dragged him to the door—she would have carried him had she possessed sufficient strength. "You shall not be taken here; it will bring misfortune on our house!"

Bewildered by this violent appeal, and urged on by the instinct of self-preservation, so powerful in every human heart, Lacheneur advanced to the threshold. The night was very dark, and a chilly fog intensified the gloom.

"See, madame," said he in a gentle voice, "how can I find my way through these mountains, which I do not know, where there are no roads—where the footpaths are scarcely traced?"

But Balstain's wife would not argue; pushing him forward and turning him as one does a blind man to set him on the right track. "Walk straight before you," said she, "always against the wind. God will protect you. Farewell!"

He turned to ask further directions, but she had reentered the house and closed the door. Upheld by a feverish excitement, he walked on during long hours. Soon he lost his way, and wandered among the mountains, benumbed with cold, stum-

bling over the rocks, at times falling to the ground. It was a wonder that he was not precipitated over the brink of some precipice. He had lost all idea of his whereabouts, and the sun was already high in the heavens when at last he met some one of whom he could ask his way. This was a little shepherd boy, who was looking for some stray goats, but the lad, frightened by the stranger's wild and haggard aspect, at first refused to approach. At last the offer of a piece of money induced him to come a little nearer. "You are just on the frontier line," said he. "Here is France, and there is Savoy."

"And which is the nearest village?"

"On the Savoy side, Saint-Jean-de-Coche; on the French side, Saint-Pavin."

So after all his terrible exertions, Lacheneur was not a league from the inn. Appalled by this discovery, he remained for a moment undecided which course to pursue. Still, after all what did it matter? Was he not doomed, and would not every road lead him to death? However, at last he remembered the carabineers the innkeeper's wife had warned him against, and slowly crawled down the steep mountainside leading back into France. He was near Saint-Pavin, when he espied a cottage standing alone, and in front of it a young peasant woman spinning in the sunshine. He dragged himself toward her, and in a weak voice begged her hospitality.

The woman rose, surprised and somewhat alarmed by the aspect of this stranger, whose face was ghastly pale, and whose clothes were torn and soiled with dust and blood. She looked at him more closely, and then perceived that his age, stature, and features corresponded with the descriptions of Lacheneur, which had been distributed round about the frontier. "Why, you are the conspirator they are hunting for, and for whom they promise a reward of twenty thousand francs," she said.

Lacheneur trembled. "Yes," he replied after a moment's hesitation, "I am Lacheneur. Betray me if you will, but in charity's name give me a morsel of bread and allow me to rest a little."

"We betray you, sir!" said she. "Ah! you don't know the Antoinettes! Come into our house, and lie down on the bed while I prepare some refreshment for you. When my husband comes home, we will see what can be done."

It was nearly sunset when the master of the house, a sturdy mountaineer, with a frank face, entered the cottage. On per-

ceiving the stranger seated at his fireside he turned frightfully pale. "Unfortunate woman!" he murmured to his wife, "don't you know that any one who shelters this fugitive will be shot, and his house leveled to the ground?"

Lacheneur overheard these words; he rose with a shudder. He knew that a price had been set upon his head, but until now he had not realized the danger to which his presence exposed these worthy people. "I will go at once," said he, gently.

But the peasant laid his broad hand kindly on the outlaw's shoulder and forced him to resume his seat. "It was not to drive you away that I said that," he remarked. "You are at home, and you shall remain here until I can find some means of insuring your safety."

The woman flung her arms round her husband's neck, and, in a loving voice, exclaimed: "Ah! you are a noble man, Antoine."

He smiled, tenderly kissed her, then, pointing to the open door: "Watch!" said he, and turning to Lacheneur: "It won't be easy to save you, for the promise of that big reward has set a number of evil-minded people on the alert. They know that you are in the neighborhood, and a rascally innkeeper has crossed the frontier for the express purpose of betraying your whereabouts to the French gendarmes."

"Balstain?"

"Yes, Balstain; and he is hunting for you now. But that's not everything; as I passed through Saint-Pavin, coming back a little while ago, I saw eight mounted soldiers, with a peasant guide, who was also on horseback. They declared that they knew you were concealed in the village, and were going to search each house in turn."

These soldiers were the Montaignac chasseurs, placed at Chupin's disposal by the Duc de Sairmeuse. The task was certainly not at all to their taste, but they were closely watched by the lieutenant in command, who hoped to receive some substantial reward if the expedition was crowned with success.

But to return to Lacheneur. "Wounded and exhausted as you are," continued Antoine, "you can't possibly make a long march for a fortnight hence, and till then you must conceal yourself. Fortunately, I know a safe retreat in the mountain, not far from here. I will take you there to-night, with provisions enough to last you for a week."

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Just then he was interrupted by a stifled cry from his wife. He turned, and saw her fall almost fainting against the door, her face white as her linen cap, her finger pointing to the path that led from Saint-Pavin to the cottage. "The soldiers—they are coming!" she gasped.

Quicker than thought, Lacheneur and the peasant sprang to the door to see for themselves. The young woman had spoken the truth; for here came the Montaignac chasseurs, slowly climbing the steep footpath. Chupin walked in advance, urging them on with voice, gesture, and example. An imprudent word from the little shepherd boy had decided the fugitive's fate; for on returning to Saint-Pavin, and hearing that the soldiers were searching for the chief conspirator, the lad had chanced to say: "I met a man just now on the mountain who asked me where he was; and I saw him go down the footpath leading to Antoine's cottage." And in proof of his words, he proudly displayed the piece of silver which Lacheneur had given him.

"One more bold stroke and we have our man!" exclaimed Chupin. "Come, comrades!" And now the party were not more than two hundred feet from the house in which the outlaw had found an asylum.

Antoine and his wife looked at each other with anguish in their eyes. They saw that their visitor was lost.

"We must save him! we must save him!" cried the woman.

"Yes, we must save him!" repeated the husband gloomily.

"They shall kill me before I betray a man in my own house."

"If he could hide in the stable behind the bundles of straw—"

"Oh, they would find him! These soldiers are worse than tigers, and the wretch who leads them on must have a bloodhound's scent." He turned quickly to Lacheneur. "Come, sir," said he, "let us leap from the back window and fly to the mountains. They will see us, but no matter! These horsemen are always clumsy runners. If you can't run, I'll carry you. They will probably fire at us, but miss their aim."

"And your wife?" asked Lacheneur.

The honest mountaineer shuddered; still he simply said: "She will join us."

Lacheneur grasped his protector's hand. "Ah! you are a noble people," he exclaimed, "and God will reward you for your kindness to a poor fugitive. But you have done too much already. I should be the basest of men if I exposed you to

useless danger. I can bear this life no longer; I have no wish to escape." Then drawing the sobbing woman to him and kissing her on the forehead, "I have a daughter, young and beautiful like yourself," he added. "Poor Marie-Anne! And I pitilessly sacrificed her to my hatred! I must not complain; come what may, I have deserved my fate."

The sound of the approaching footsteps became more and more distinct. Lacheneur straightened himself up, and seemed to be gathering all his energy for the decisive moment. "Remain inside," he said imperiously, to Antoine and his wife. "I am going out; they must not arrest me in your house." And as he spoke, he crossed the threshold with a firm tread. The soldiers were but a few paces off. "Halt!" he exclaimed, in a loud, ringing voice. "Are you not seeking for Lacheneur? I am he! I surrender myself."

His manner was so dignified, his tone so impressive, that the soldiers involuntarily paused. This man before them was doomed; they knew the fate awaiting him, and seemed as awed as if they had been in the presence of death itself. One there was among the searching party whom Lacheneur's ringing words had literally terrified, and this was Chupin. Remorse filled his cowardly heart, and pale and trembling, he sought to hide himself behind the soldiers.

But Lacheneur walked straight toward him. "So it is you who have sold my life, Chupin?" he said scornfully. "You have not forgotten, I perceive, how often my daughter filled your empty larder—so now you take your revenge."

The old scoundrel seemed crushed by these words. Now that he had done this foul deed, he knew what betrayal really was. "So be it," resumed Lacheneur. "You will receive the price of my blood; but it will not bring you good fortune—traitor!"

Chupin, however, indignant with his own weakness, was already making a vigorous effort to recover a semblance of self-composure. "You have conspired against the king," he stammered. "I only did my duty in denouncing you." And turning to the soldiers, he added: "As for you, comrades, you may be sure the Duc de Sairmeuse will remember your services."

Lacheneur's hands were bound, and the party was about to descend the slope, when a man, roughly clad, bareheaded, covered with perspiration, and panting for breath, suddenly made his appearance. The twilight was falling, but Lacheneur recognized Balstain. "Ah! you have him!" exclaimed the imm-

keeper, pointing to the prisoner, as soon as he was within speaking distance. "The reward belongs to me—I denounced him first on the other side of the frontier, as the carabineers at Saint-Jean-de-Coché will testify. He would have been captured last night in my house if he hadn't managed to run away in my absence. I've been following the bandit for sixteen hours." He spoke with extraordinary vehemence, being full of fear lest he might lose his reward, and only reap disgrace and obloquy in recompense for his treason.

"If you have any right to the money, you must prove it before the proper authorities," said the officer in command.

"If I have any right!" interrupted Balstain; "who contests my right, then?" He looked threateningly around him, and casting his eyes on Chupin, "Is it you?" he asked. "Do you dare to assert that you discovered the brigand?"

"Yes, it was I who discovered his hiding-place."

"You lie, you impostor!" vociferated the innkeeper; "you lie!" The soldiers did not budge. This scene repaid them for the disgust they had experienced during the afternoon. "But," continued Balstain, "what else could one expect from such a knave as Chupin? Every one knows that he's been obliged to fly from France over and over again on account of his crimes. Where did you take refuge when you crossed the frontier, Chupin? In my house, in Balstain's inn. You were fed and protected there. How many times haven't I saved you from the gendarmes and the galleys? More times than I can count. And to reward me you steal my property; you steal this man who was mine—"

"The fellow's insane!" ejaculated the terrified Chupin, "he's mad!"

"At least you will be reasonable," exclaimed the innkeeper, suddenly changing his tactics. "Let's see, Chupin, what you'll do for an old friend? Divide, won't you? No, you say no? How much will you give me, comrade? A third? Is that too much? A quarter, then—"

Chupin felt that the soldiers were enjoying his humiliation. They were indeed, sneering at him, and only an instant before they had, with instinctive loathing, avoided coming in contact with him. The old knave's blood was boiling, and pushing Balstain aside, he cried to the chasseurs: "Come—are we going to spend the night here?"

On hearing these words, Balstain's eyes sparkled with re-

vengeful fury, and suddenly drawing his knife from his pocket and making the sign of the cross in the air: "Saint-Jean-de-Coche," he exclaimed, in a ringing voice, "and you, Holy Virgin, hear my vow. May my soul burn in hell if I ever use a knife at meals until I have plunged the one I now hold into the heart of the scoundrel who has defrauded me!" With these words he hurried away into the woods, and the soldiers took up their line of march.

But Chupin was no longer the same. His impudence had left him and he walked along with hanging head, his mind full of sinister presentiments. He felt sure that such an oath as Balstain's, and uttered by such a man, was equivalent to a death warrant, or at least to a speedy prospect of assassination. The thought tormented him so much indeed, that he would not allow the detachment to spend the night at Saint-Pavin, as had been agreed upon. He was impatient to leave the neighborhood. So after supper he procured a cart; the prisoner was placed in it, securely bound, and the party started for Montaignac. The great bell was tolling two in the morning when Lacheneur was conducted into the citadel; and at that very moment M. d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois were making their final preparations for escape.



**O**N being left alone in his cell after Marie-Anne's departure, Chanlouineau gave himself up to despair. He loved Marie-Anne most passionately, and the idea that he would never see her again on earth proved heart-rending. Some little comfort he certainly derived from the thought that he had done his duty, that he had sacrificed his own life to secure her happiness, but then this result had only been obtained by simulating the most abject cowardice, which must disgrace him forever in the eyes of his fellow prisoners, and the guards. Had he not offered to sell Lacheneur's life for his own, moreover? True it was but a ruse, and yet those who knew nothing of his secret would always brand him as a traitor and a coward. To a man



of his true, valiant heart such a prospect was particularly distressing, and he was still brooding over the idea when the Marquis de Courtonnieu entered his cell to ascertain the result of Marie-Anne's visit. "Well, my good fellow—" began the old nobleman, in his most condescending manner; but Chanlouineau did not allow him time to finish. "Leave," he cried, in a fit of rage. "Leave or—"

Without waiting to hear the end of the sentence the marquis made his escape, greatly surprised and not a little dismayed by this sudden change in the prisoner's manner. "What a dangerous, bloodthirsty rascal!" he remarked to the guard. "It would, perhaps, be advisable to put him into a strait-jacket!"

But there was no necessity for that; for scarcely had the marquis left, than the young farmer threw himself on to his pallet, oppressed with feverish anxiety. Would Marie-Anne know how to make the best use of the weapon he had placed in her hands? He hoped so, for she would have the Abbe Midon's assistance, and besides he considered that the possession of this letter would frighten the Marquis de Sairmeuse into any concessions. In this last surmise Chanlouineau was entirely mistaken. The fear which Martial seemingly evinced during the interview with Marie-Anne and his father was all affected. He pretended to be alarmed, in order to frighten the duke, for he really wished to assist the girl he so passionately loved, and besides the idea of saving an enemy's life, of wresting him from the executioner on the very steps of the scaffold, was very pleasing to his mind which at times took a decidedly chivalrous turn. Poor Chanlouineau, however, was ignorant of all this, and consequently his anxiety was perfectly natural. Throughout the afternoon he remained in anxious suspense, and when the night fell, stationed himself at the window of his cell gazing on to the plain below, and trusting that if the baron succeeded in escaping, some sign would warn him of the fact. Marie-Anne had visited him, she knew the cell he occupied and surely she would find some means of letting him know that his sacrifice had not been in vain. Shortly after two o'clock in the morning he was alarmed by a great bustle in the corridor outside. Doors were thrown open, and then slammed to; there was a loud rattle of keys; guards hurried to and fro, calling each other; the passage was lighted up, and then as Chanlouineau peered through the grating in the door of his cell he suddenly perceived Lacheneur as pale as a

ghost walk by conducted by some soldiers. The young farmer almost doubted his eyesight; for he really believed his former leader had escaped. Another hour, and another hour passed by and yet did he prolong his anxious vigil. Not a sound, save the tramp of the guards in the corridor, and the faint echo of some distant challenge as sentinels were relieved outside. At last, however, there abruptly came a despairing cry. What was it? He listened; but it was not repeated. After all, the occurrence was not so surprising. There were twenty men in that citadel under sentence of death, and the agony of that, their last night, might well call forth a lamentation. At length the gray light of dawn stole through the window bars, the sun rose rapidly and Chanlouineau, hopeful for some sign, till then murmured in despair, that the letter must have been useless. Poor generous peasant! His heart would have leaped with joy if as he spoke those words he could only have cast a glance on the courtyard of the citadel.

An hour after the *reveille* had sounded, two countrywomen, carrying butter and eggs to market, presented themselves at the fortress gate, and declared that while passing through the fields below the cliff on which the citadel was built, they had perceived a rope dangling from the side of the rock. A rope! Then one of the condemned prisoners must have escaped. The guards hastened from cell to cell and soon discovered that the Baron d'Escorval's room was empty. And not merely had the baron fled, but he had taken with him the man who had been left to guard him—Corporal Bavois, of the grenadiers. Every one's amazement was intense, but their fright was still greater. There was not a single officer who did not tremble on thinking of his responsibility; not one who did not see his hopes of advancement forever blighted. What should be said to the formidable Duc de Sairmeuse and to the Marquis de Courtornieu, who in spite of his calm polished manners, was almost as much to be feared? It was necessary to warn them, however, and so a sergeant was despatched with the news. Soon they made their appearance, accompanied by Martial; and to look at all three it would have been said that they were boiling over with anger and indignation. The Duc de Sairmeuse's rage was especially conspicuous. He swore at everybody, accused everybody, and threatened everybody. He began by consigning all the keepers and guards to prison, and even talked of demanding the dismissal of all the officers.

"As for that miserable Bavois," he exclaimed—"as for that cowardly deserter, he shall be shot as soon as we capture him, and we will capture him, you may depend upon it!"

The officials had hoped to appease the duke's wrath a little by informing him of Lacheneur's arrest; but he knew of this already, for Chupin had ventured to wake him up in the middle of the night to tell him the great news. The baron's escape afforded his grace an opportunity to exalt Chupin's merits. "The man who discovered Lacheneur will know how to find this traitor D'Escorval," he remarked.

As for M. de Courtornieu, he took what he called "measures for restoring this great culprit to the hands of justice." That is to say, he despatched couriers in every direction, with orders to make close inquiries throughout the neighborhood. His commands were brief, but to the point; they were to watch the frontier, to submit all travelers to a rigorous examination, to search the houses and sow the description of D'Escorval's appearance broadcast through the land. But first of all he issued instructions for the arrest of the Abbe Midon and Maurice d'Escorval.

Among the officers present there was an old lieutenant, who had felt deeply wounded by some of the imputations which the Duc de Sairmeuse had cast right and left in his affected wrath. This lieutenant heard the Marquis de Courtornieu give his orders, and then stepped forward with a gloomy air, remarking that these measures were doubtless all very well, but at the same time it was urgent that an investigation should take place at once, so as to learn for certain how the baron had escaped and who were his accomplices if he had any. At the mention of this word "investigation," both the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu shuddered. They could not ignore the fact that their reputations were at stake, and that the merest trifle might disclose the truth. A neglected precaution, any insignificant detail, an imprudent word or gesture might ruin their ambitious hopes forever. They trembled to think that this officer might be a man of unusual shrewdness, who had suspected their complicity, and was impatient to verify his presumptions. In point of fact, they were unnecessarily alarmed, for the old lieutenant had not the slightest suspicion of the truth. He had spoken on the impulse of the moment, merely to give vent to his displeasure. He was not even keen enough to remark a rapid glance which

the duke and the marquis exchanged. Martial noticed this look, however, and with studied politeness, remarked: "Yes, we must institute an investigation; that suggestion is as shrewd as it is opportune."

The old lieutenant turned away with a muttered oath. "That coxcomb is poking fun at me," he thought; "and he and his father and that prig the marquis deserve a box on the ears."

In reality, however, Martial was not poking fun at him. Bold as was his remark it was made advisedly. To silence all future suspicions it was absolutely necessary that an investigation should take place immediately. But then it would, by reason of their position and functions, naturally devolve on the duke and the marquis, who would know just how much to conceal, and how much to disclose. They began their task immediately, with a haste which could not fail to dispel all doubts, if indeed any existed in the minds of their subordinates.

Martial thought he knew the details of the escape as well as the fugitives themselves, for even if they had been the actors, he was at any rate the author of the drama played that night. However, he was soon obliged to admit that he was mistaken in his opinion; for the investigation revealed several incomprehensible particulars. It had been determined beforehand that the baron and the corporal would have to make two successive descents. Hence the necessity of having two ropes. These ropes had been provided, and the prisoners must have used them. And yet only one rope could be found—the one which the peasant woman had perceived hanging from the rocky platform at the base of the citadel where it was made fast to an iron crowbar. From the window of the cell, to the platform, there was no rope, however. "This is most extraordinary!" murmured Martial, thoughtfully.

"Very strange!" approved M. de Courtornieu.

"How the devil could they have reached the base of the tower?"

"That is what I can't understand."

But Martial soon found other causes for surprise. On examining the rope that remained—the one which had been used in making the descent of the cliff—he discovered that it was not of a single piece. Two pieces had been knotted together. The longest piece had evidently been too short. How did this happen? Could the duke have made a mistake in the height of the cliff? or had the abbe measured the rope incorrectly?

But Martial had also measured it with his eye, while it was wound round him, and it had then seemed to him that the rope was much longer, fully a third longer, than it now appeared.

"There must have been some accident," he remarked to his father and the marquis; "what I can't say."

"Well, what does it matter?" replied M. de Courtornieu, "you have the compromising letter, haven't you?"

But Martial's mind was one of these that never rest until they have solved the problem before them. Accordingly, he insisted on going to inspect the rocks at the foot of the precipice. Here they discovered several stains, formed of coagulated blood. "One of the fugitives must have fallen," said Martial, quickly, "and been dangerously wounded!"

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the Duc de Sairmeuse, "if it is the Baron d'Escorval who has broken his neck, I shall be delighted!"

Martial turned crimson, and looked searchingly at his father. "I suppose, sir, that you do not mean one word of what you are saying," he observed, coldly. "We pledged ourselves upon the honor of our name to save the baron. If he has been killed it will be a great misfortune for us, a very great misfortune."

When his son addressed him in this haughty, freezing tone of his, the duke never knew how to reply. He was indignant, but his son's was the stronger nature.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed M. de Courtornieu; "if the rascal had merely been wounded we should have known it."

Such also was Chupin's opinion. He had been sent for by the duke, and had just made his appearance. But the old scoundrel, usually so loquacious and officious, now replied in the briefest fashion; and, strange to say, he did not offer his services. His habitual assurance and impudence, and his customary cunning smile, had quite forsaken him; and in lieu thereof his brow was overcast, and his manners strangely perturbed. So marked was the change that even the Duc de Sairmeuse observed it. "What misfortune have you had, Master Chupin?" he asked.

"Why, while I was coming here," replied the old knave in a sullen tone, "a band of ragamuffins pelted me with mud and stones, and ran after me, shouting: 'Traitor! traitor!' as loud as they could." He clenched his fists as he spoke, as if he were

meditating vengeance; then suddenly he added: "The people of Montaignac are quite pleased this morning. They know that the baron has escaped, and they are rejoicing."

Alas! the joy which Chupin spoke of was destined to be of short duration, for the execution of the conspirators sentenced on the preceding afternoon was to take place that very day. At noon the gate of the citadel was closed, and the drums rolled loudly as a preface to the coming tragedy. Consternation spread through the town. Doors were carefully secured, shutters closed, and window-blinds pulled down. The streets became deserted, and a death-like silence prevailed. At last, just as three o'clock was striking, the gate of the fortress was reopened, and under the lofty archway came fourteen doomed men, each with a priest by his side. One-and-twenty had been condemned to death, but the Baron d'Escorval had eluded the executioner, and remorse or fear had tempered the Duc de Sairmeuse's thirst for blood. He and M. de Courtornieu had granted reprieves to six of the prisoners, and at that very moment a courier was starting for Paris with six petitions for pardon, signed by the military commission.

Chanlouineau was not among those for whom royal clemency was solicited. When he left his cell, without knowing whether his plan for saving the Baron d'Escorval had proved of any use or not, he counted and examined his thirteen comrades with keen anxiety. His eyes betrayed such an agony of anguish that the priest who accompanied him asked him in a whisper: "Whom are you looking for, my son?"

"For the Baron d'Escorval."

"He escaped last night."

"Ah! now I shall die content!" exclaimed the heroic peasant. And he died as he had sworn he would—without even changing color—calm and proud, the name of Marie-Anne upon his lips.

There was one woman, a fair young girl, who was not in the least degree affected by the tragic incidents attending the repression of the Montaignac revolt. This was Blanche de Courtornieu, who smiled as brightly as ever, and who, although her father exercised almost dictatorial power in conjunction with the Duc de Sairmeuse, did not raise as much as her little finger to save any one of the condemned prisoners from execution. These rebels had dared to stop her carriage on the public road, and this was an offense which she could neither forgive nor forget. She also knew that she had only owed her liberty to

Marie-Anne's intercession, and to a woman of such jealous pride this knowledge was galling in the extreme. Hence it was with bitter resentment that, on the morning following her arrival in Montaignac, she denounced to her father what she styled that Lacheneur girl's inconceivable arrogance, and the peasantry's frightful brutality. And when the Marquis de Courtornieu asked her if she would consent to give evidence against the Baron d'Escorval, she coldly replied that she considered it was her duty to do so. She was fully aware that her testimony would send the baron to the scaffold, and yet she did not hesitate a moment. True, she carefully concealed her personal spite, and declared she was only influenced by the interests of justice. Impartiality compels us to add, moreover, that she really believed the Baron d'Escorval to be a leader of the rebels. Chanlouineau had pronounced the name in her presence, and her error was all the more excusable as Maurice was usually known in the neighborhood by his Christian name. Had the young farmer called to "Monsieur Maurice" for instructions, Blanche would have understood the situation, but he had exclaimed, "M. d'Escorval," and hence her mistake.

After she had delivered to her father her written statement of what occurred on the highroad on the night of the revolt, the heiress assumed an attitude of seeming indifference, and when any of her friends chanced to speak of the rising, she alluded to the plebeian conspirators in tones of proud disdain. In her heart, however, she blessed this timely outbreak, which had removed her rival from her path. "For now," thought she, "the marquis will return to me, and I will make him forget the bold creature who bewitched him!" In this she was somewhat mistaken. True, Martial returned and paid his court, but he no longer loved her. He had detected the calculating ambition she had sought to hide under a mask of seeming simplicity. He had realized how vain and selfish she was, and his former admiration was now well-nigh transformed into repugnance; for he could but contrast her character with the noble nature of Marie-Anne, now lost to him forever. It was mainly the knowledge that Lacheneur's daughter could never be his which prompted him to a seeming reconciliation with Blanche. He said to himself that the duke, his father, and the Marquis de Courtornieu had exchanged a solemn pledge; that he, too, had given his word, and that after all Blanche was his promised wife. Was it worth while to break off the engagement? Would

he not be compelled to marry some day or another? His rank and name required him to do so, and such being the case what did it matter whom he married, since the only woman he had ever truly loved—the only woman he ever could love—was never to be his? To a man of Martial's education it was no very difficult task to pay proper court to the jealous Blanche, to surround her with every attention, and to affect a love he did not really feel; and, indeed, so perfectly did he play his part that Mademoiselle de Courtornieu might well flatter herself with the thought that she reigned supreme in his affections.

While Martial seemed wholly occupied with thoughts of his approaching marriage, he was really tortured with anxiety as to the fate which had overtaken the Baron d'Escorval and the other fugitives. The three members of the D'Escorval family, the abbe, Marie-Anne, Corporal Bavois, and four half-pay officers had all disappeared, leaving no trace behind them. This was very remarkable, as the search prescribed by MM. de Sairmeuse and Courtornieu had been conducted with feverish activity, greatly to the terror of its promoters. Still what could they do? They had imprudently excited the zeal of their subordinates, and now they were unable to allay it. Fortunately, however, all the efforts to discover the fugitives proved unsuccessful; and the only information that could be obtained came from a peasant, who declared that on the morning of the escape, just before daybreak, he had met a party of a dozen persons, men and women, who seemed to be carrying a dead body. This circumstance, taken in connection with the broken rope and the stains of blood at the bottom of the cliff, made Martial tremble. He was also strongly impressed by another circumstance, which came to light when the soldiers on guard the night of the escape were questioned as to what transpired. "I was on guard in the corridor communicating with the prisoner's quarters in the tower," said one of these soldiers, "when at about half-past two o'clock, just after Lacheneur had been placed in his cell, I saw an officer approaching me. I challenged him; he gave me the countersign, and, naturally, I let him pass. He went down the passage, and entered the empty room next to M. d'Escorval's. He remained there about five minutes."

"Did you recognize this officer?" asked Martial eagerly.

"No," answered the soldier. "He wore a large cloak, the collar of which was turned up so high that it hid his face to the very eyes."



"Whom could this mysterious officer have been?" thought Martial, racking his brains. "What was he doing in the room where I left the ropes?"

The Marquis de Courtornieu, present at the examination, seemed much disturbed. Turning to the witness, he asked him angrily: "How could you be ignorant that there were so many sympathizers with this movement among the garrison? You might have known that this visitor, who concealed his face so carefully, was an accomplice warned by Bavois, who had come to see if he needed a helping hand."

This seemed a plausible explanation, but it did not satisfy Martial. "It is very strange," he thought, "that M. d'Escorval has not even deigned to let me know he is in safety. The service I rendered him deserves that acknowledgment, at least."

Such was the young marquis's anxiety that, despite his repugnance for Chupin, the spy, he resolved to seek that arch-traitor's assistance, with the view of discovering what had become of the fugitives. It was no longer easy, however, to secure the old rascal's services, for since he had received the price of Lacheneur's blood—these twenty thousand francs which had so fascinated him—he had deserted the Duc de Sairmeuse's house, and taken up his quarters in a small inn at the outskirts of the town; where he spent his days alone in a large room on the second floor. At night-time he barricaded the door, and drank, drank, drank; and till daybreak he might be heard cursing and singing, or struggling against imaginary enemies. Still he dared not disobey the summons which a soldier brought him to hasten to the Hotel de Sairmeuse at once.

"I wish to discover what has become of the Baron d'Escorval," said Martial when the old spy arrived.

Chupin trembled, and a fleeting color dyed his cheeks. "The Montaignac police are at your disposal," he answered sulkily. "They, perhaps, can satisfy your curiosity, Monsieur le Marquis, but I don't belong to the police."

Was he in earnest, or was he merely simulating a refusal with the view of obtaining a high price for his services? Martial inclined to the latter opinion. "You shall have no reason to complain of my generosity," said he. "I will pay you well."

That word "pay" would have made Chupin's eyes gleam with delight a week before, but on hearing it now he at once flew into a furious passion. "So it was to tempt me again

that you summoned me here!" he exclaimed. "You would do much better to leave me quietly at my inn."

"What do you mean, you fool?"

But Chupin did not even hear the interruption. "People told me," quoth he, with increasing fury, "that, by betraying Lacheneur, I should be doing my duty and serving the king. I betrayed him, and now I am treated as if I had committed the worst of crimes. Formerly, when I lived by stealing and poaching, folks despised me, perhaps; but they didn't shun me as they do the pestilence. They called me rascal, robber, and the like; but they would drink with me all the same. To-day I've twenty thousand francs in my pocket, and yet I'm treated as if I were a venomous beast. If I approach any one he draws back, and if I enter a room, those who are there hasten out of it." At the recollection of the insults heaped upon him since Lacheneur's capture, the old rascal's rage reached a climax. "Was what I did so abominable?" he pursued. "Then why did your father propose it? The shame should fall on him. He shouldn't have tempted a poor man with wealth like that. If, on the contrary, I did my duty, let them make laws to protect me."

Martial perceived the necessity of reassuring this troubled mind. "Chupin, my boy," said he, "I don't ask you to discover M. d'Escorval in order to denounce him; far from it—I only want you to ascertain if any one at Saint-Pavin, or at Saint-Jean-de-Coche, knows of his having crossed the frontier."

The mention of Saint-Jean-de-Coche made Chupin shudder. "Do you want me to be murdered?" he exclaimed, remembering Balstain's vow. "I must let you know that I value my life now that I'm rich." And seized with a sort of panic he fled precipitately.

Martial was stupefied with astonishment. "One might really suppose that the rascal was sorry for what he had done," thought he.

If that were really the case, Chupin was not the only person afflicted with qualms of conscience, for both M. de Courtornieu and the Duc de Sairmeuse were secretly blaming themselves for the exaggeration of their first reports, and the manner in which they had magnified the proportions of the rebellion. They accused each other of undue haste, of neglecting the proper forms of process, and had to admit in their hearts that the sentences were most unjust. They each tried to make the

other responsible for the blood which had been spilled; and were certainly doing all that they could to obtain a pardon for the six prisoners who had been reprieved. But their efforts did not succeed; for one night a courier arrived at Montaignac, bearing the following laconic despatch: "The twenty-one convicted prisoners must all be executed." That is to say, the Duc de Richelieu and M. Decazes, with their colleagues of the council of ministers, had decided that the petitions for clemency must be refused.

This despatch was a terrible blow for the Duc de Sairmeuse and M. de Courtornieu. They knew, better than any one else, how little these poor fellows were deserving of death. They knew it would soon be publicly proved that two of these six men had taken no part whatever in the conspiracy. What was to be done? Martial wished his father to resign his authority; but the duke had not the strength of mind to do so. Besides, M. de Courtornieu encouraged him to retain his functions, remarking that no doubt all this was very unfortunate, but, since the wine was drawn, it was necessary to drink it; indeed, his grace could not now draw back without causing a terrible scandal.

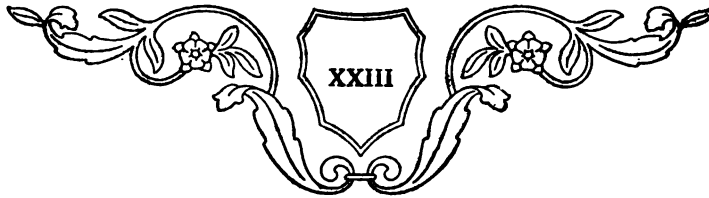
Accordingly, the next day a dismal roll of drums was heard again, and the six doomed men, two of whom were known to be innocent, were led outside the walls of the citadel and shot, on the same spot where, only a week before, fourteen of their comrades had fallen.

The prime mover in the conspiracy had not, however, yet been tried. He had fallen into a state of gloomy despondency, which lasted during his whole term of imprisonment. He was terribly broken, both in body and mind. Once only did the blood mount to his pallid cheeks, and that was on the morning when the Duc de Sairmeuse entered the cell to examine him. "It was you who drove me to do what I did," exclaimed Lacheneur. "God sees us and judges us both!"

Unhappy man! his faults had been great: his chastisement was terrible. He had sacrificed his children on the altar of his wounded pride; and did not even have the consolation of pressing them to his heart and of asking their forgiveness before he died. Alone in his cell, he could not turn his mind from his son and daughter; but such was the terrible situation in which he had placed himself that he dared not ask what had become of them. Through a compassionate keeper, however, he learned

that nothing had been heard of Jean, and that it was supposed Marie-Anne had escaped to some foreign country with the D'Escorval family. When summoned before the court for trial, Lacheneur was calm and dignified in manner. He made no attempt at defense, but answered every question with perfect frankness. He took all the blame upon himself, and would not give the name of any one accomplice. Condemned to be beheaded, he was executed on the following day, walking to the scaffold and mounting to the platform with a firm step. A few seconds later the blade of the guillotine fell with a loud whir, and the rebellion of the fourth of March counted its twenty-first victim.

That same evening the townsfolk of Montaignac were busy talking of the magnificent rewards which were to be bestowed on the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu for their services to the royal cause, and a report was flying abroad to the effect that Martial and Mademoiselle Blanche were now to be married with great pomp, and with as little delay as possible.



AFTER Lacheneur had been executed, the codictators, regretting, as we have already said, the precipitation with which they had sentenced many of the minor partizans of the revolt, sought to propitiate public opinion by treating the remaining prisoners with unexpected clemency. Out of a hundred peasants still confined in the citadel, only eighteen or twenty were tried, and the sentences pronounced upon them were light in the extreme; all the others were released. Major Carini, the leader of the military conspirators in Montaignac, had expected to lose his head, but to his own astonishment he was only sentenced to two years' imprisonment. This tardy indulgence did not, however, efface popular recollections of previous severity, and the townsfolk of Montaignac openly declared that if MM. de Sairmeuse and De Courtornieu were clement, it was only because they were afraid of the conse-

quences that might await continued tyranny. So thus it came to pass that people execrated them for their past cruelty, and despised them for their subsequent cowardice. However, both the duke and the marquis were ignorant of the true current of public opinion, and hurried on with their preparations for their children's wedding. It was arranged that the ceremony should take place on the 17th of April, at the village church of Sairmeuse, and that a grand entertainment should be given to the guests in the duke's chateau, which was indeed transformed into a fairy palace for the occasion.

A new priest, who had taken the Abbe Midon's place, celebrated the nuptial mass, and then addressed the newly-wedded pair in congratulatory terms. "You will be, you *must* be happy!" he exclaimed in conclusion, fully believing for the moment that he spoke the words of prophecy. And who would not have believed as he did? Where could two young people be found more richly dowered with all the attributes of worldly happiness?—youth, health, opulence, and rank. And yet, although the new marquise's eyes sparkled joyfully, the bridegroom seemed strangely preoccupied. Blanche was before him radiant with beauty, proud with success; but his mind, despite all efforts, wandered back to Marie-Anne—to the Marie-Anne he had lost, who had disappeared, whom he might never behold again. "Ah! if she had but loved him," thought Martial, "what happiness would have been his. But now he was bound for life to a woman whom he did not love."

At dinner, however, he succeeded in shaking off his sadness, thanks, perhaps, to the exhilarating influence of several glasses of champagne, and when the guests rose from table he had almost forgotten his forebodings. He was rising in his turn, when a servant approached him and whispered: "There is a young peasant in the hall who wishes to speak with Monsieur le Marquis. He would not give me his name."

"Wouldn't give his name?" ejaculated Martial. "Ah, well, on one's wedding-day one must grant an audience to everybody." And with a smile he descended the staircase. Beside the fragrant flowering plants with which the vestibule was lined he found a young man with a pale face, whose eyes glittered with feverish brilliancy. On recognizing him Martial could not restrain an exclamation of surprise. "Jean Lacheneur!" he exclaimed; "you imprudent fellow!"

Young Lacheneur stepped forward. "You thought you were

rid of me," he said, bitterly. "But you see you were mistaken. However, you can order your people to arrest me if you choose."

Martial's brow lowered on hearing these insulting words. "What do you want?" he asked coldly.

"I am to give you this on behalf of Maurice d'Escorval," replied Jean, drawing a letter from his pocket.

With an eager hand, Martial broke the seal; but scarcely had he glanced at the contents than he turned as pale as death and staggered back, exclaiming: "Infamous!"

"What am I to say to Maurice?" insisted Jean. "What do you intend to do?"

"Come—you shall see," replied the young marquis, seizing Jean by the arm and dragging him up the staircase. The expression of Martial's features had so changed during his brief absence that the wedding guests looked at him with astonishment when he reentered the grand saloon holding an open letter in one hand, and leading with the other a young peasant whom no one recognized. "Where is my father?" he asked, in a husky voice; "where is the Marquis de Courtornieu?"

The duke and the marquis were with Blanche in a little drawing-room leading out of the main hall. Martial hastened there, followed by a crowd of wondering guests, who, foreseeing a stormy scene, were determined to witness it. He walked straight toward M. de Courtornieu, who was standing by the fireplace, and handing him the letter: "Read!" said he, in a threatening voice.

M. de Courtornieu mechanically obeyed the injunction; but suddenly he turned livid; the paper trembled in his hands: he averted his glance, and was obliged to lean against the mantelpiece for support. "I don't understand," he stammered: "no, I don't understand."

The duke and Blanche had both sprung forward. "What is the matter?" they both asked in one breath; "what has happened?"

Martial's reply was to tear the letter from the Marquis de Courtornieu's hands, and to turn to his father with these words: "Listen to this note I have just received."

Three hundred people were assembled in the room, or clustering round the doorway, but the silence was so perfect that Martial's voice reached the farthest extremity of the grand hall as he read:

"Monsieur le Marquis—Upon the honor of your name, and in exchange for a dozen lines that threatened you with ruin, you promised us the Baron d'Escorval's life. You did, indeed, bring the ropes by which he was to make his escape, but they had been previously cut, and my father was precipitated on to the rocks below. You have forfeited your honor, sir. You have soiled your name with opprobrium, and while a drop of blood remains in my veins, I will leave no means untried to punish you for your cowardice and treason. By killing me you would, it is true, escape the chastisement I am reserving for you. I challenge you to fight with me. Shall I wait for you to-morrow on La Reche? At what hour? With what weapons? If you are the vilest of men, you can appoint a meeting, and then send your gendarmes to arrest me. That would be an act worthy of you. MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

On hearing these words the Duc de Sairmeuse was seized with despair. He saw the secret of the baron's flight made public, and his own political prospects ruined. "Hush!" he hurriedly exclaimed in a low voice; "hush, wretched fellow, you will ruin us!"

But Martial did not even seem to hear him. He finished his perusal, and then looking the Marquis de Courtornieu full in the face: "Now, what do you think?" he asked.

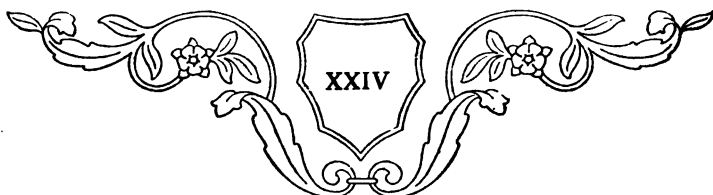
"I am still unable to comprehend," replied the old nobleman, coldly.

Martial raised his hand; and every one present believed that he was about to strike his father-in-law. "You don't comprehend," he exclaimed sarcastically. "Ah, well, if *you* don't, *I* do. I know who that officer was who entered the room where I deposited the ropes—and I know what took him there." He paused, crumpled the letter between his hands, and threw it in M. de Courtornieu's face, with these last words: "Here, take your reward, you cowardly traitor!"

Overwhelmed by this denouement the marquis sank back into an armchair, and Martial, still holding Jean Lacheneur by the arm, was on the point of leaving the room, when his young wife, wild with despair, tried to detain him. "You shall not go!" she exclaimed, "you can not! Where are you going? That young fellow with you is Jean Lacheneur. I recognize him. You want to join his sister—your mistress!"

Martial indignantly pushed his wife aside. "How dare you

insult the noblest and purest of women," he exclaimed. "Ah, well—yes—I am going to find Marie-Anne. Farewell!" And with these words he left the chateau.



THE ledge of rock on which the Baron d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois rested on descending from the tower was not more than a yard and a half across its widest part. It sloped down toward the edge of the precipice, and its surface was so rugged and uneven that it was considered very imprudent to stand there, even in the daytime. Thus it will be understood that the task of lowering a man from this ledge, at dead of night, was perilous in the extreme. Before allowing the baron to descend, Bavois took every possible precaution to save himself from being dragged over the verge of the precipice by his companion's weight. He fixed his crowbar firmly in a crevice of the rock, seated himself, braced his feet against the bar, threw his shoulders well back, and then, feeling that his position was secure, he bid the baron let himself down. The sudden parting of the rope hurled the corporal against the tower wall, and then he rebounded forward on his knees. For an instant he hung suspended over the abyss, his hands clutching at the empty air. A hasty movement, and he would have fallen. But he possessed a marvelous power of will, and had faced danger so often in his life that he was able to restrain himself. Prudently, but with determined energy, he screwed his feet and knees into the crevices of the rock, feeling with his hands for some point of support; then gradually sinking on to one side, he at last succeeded in dragging himself from the verge of the precipice.

The effort had been a terrible one, his limbs were quite cramped, and he was obliged to sit down and rest himself. He fully believed that the baron had been killed by his fall, but this catastrophe did not produce much effect upon the old soldier, who had seen so many comrades fall by his side on fields of battle. What did amaze him, however, was the break-



ing of the rope—a rope so thick that one would have supposed it capable of sustaining the weight of ten men like the baron. It was too dark to examine the fragment remaining in his possession, but on feeling it at the lower end with his finger, the corporal was surprised to find it quite smooth and even, not rough and ragged as is usual after a break. "It must have been cut—yes, cut nearly through," exclaimed Bavois with an oath. And at the same time a previous incident recurred to his mind. "This," thought he, "explains the noise which the poor baron heard in the next room! And I said to him: 'Nonsense! it is a rat!'"

With the view of verifying his conjectures, Bavois passed the cord round about the crowbar and pulled at it with all his strength. It parted in three places. The discovery appalled him. A part of the rope had fallen with the baron, and it was evident that the remaining fragments, even if tied together, would not be long enough to reach the base of the rock. What was to be done? How could he escape? If he could not descend the precipice he must remain on the ledge from which there was no other mode of escape. "It's all up, corporal," he murmured to himself. "At daybreak they will find the baron's cell empty. They will poke their heads out of the window, and see you here perched like a stone saint on his pedestal. Of course you'll be captured, tried, and condemned, and have to take your turn in the ditches. Ready! Aim! Fire! That'll be the end of your story."

He stopped short, for a vague idea had just entered his mind, which he felt might lead to salvation. It had come to him in touching the rope which he and the baron had used in their descent from the latter's cell to the rocky ledge, and which, firmly attached to the bars above, hung down the side of the tower. "If you had that rope which hangs there, corporal," said he, you could tie it to these bits, and then the cord would be long enough to take you down the precipice. But how can one obtain it? If one goes back after it, one can't bring it down and come down again one's self at the same time. He pondered for a moment and then began talking to himself again. "Attention, corporal," said he. "You are going to knot the five pieces of rope you've got here together, and you're going to fasten them to your waist; next you're going to climb up to that window, hand over hand. Not an easy matter! A staircase would be preferable. But no matter, you mustn't be

finical, corporal. So you will climb up and find yourself in the cell again. What are you going to do there? A mere nothing. You will unfasten the cord secured to the window bars, you will tie it to this one and that will give you eighty feet of good strong rope. Then you will pass the rope about one of the bars that remain intact, you will tie the two ends together, and then the rope will be doubled. Next you must let yourself down here again, and when you are here, you will only have to untie one of the knots, and the rope will be at your service. Do you understand, corporal?"

The corporal did understand so well that in less than twenty minutes he was back again upon the narrow shelf of rock, having successfully accomplished the dangerous feat which he had planned. Not without a terrible effort, however, not without torn and bleeding hands and knees. Still he had succeeded in obtaining the rope, and now he was certain that he could make his escape from his dangerous position. He was chuckling gleefully at the prospect when suddenly he bethought himself of M. d'Escorval, whom he had forgotten first in his anxiety, and then in his joy. "Poor baron," murmured the corporal remorsefully. "I shall succeed in saving my miserable life, for which no one cares, but I was unable to save his. No doubt by this time his friends have carried him away."

As he uttered these words he leaned forward, and to his intense amazement perceived a faint light moving here and there in the depths below. What could have happened? Something extraordinary, that was evident; or else intelligent men like the baron's friends would never have displayed this light, which, if noticed from the citadel, would betray their presence and ruin them. However, the corporal's time was too precious to be wasted in idle conjectures. "Better go down on the double-quick," he said aloud, as if to spur on his courage. "Come, my friend, spit on your hands and be off!"

As he spoke the old soldier threw himself flat on his belly and crawled slowly backward to the verge of the precipice. The spirit was strong, but the flesh shuddered. To march upon a battery had been a mere pastime for him in days of imperial glory, but to face an unknown peril, to suspend one's life upon a cord, was a very different matter. Great drops of perspiration, caused by the horror of his situation, stood out upon his brow when he felt that half his body had passed over the edge of the precipice, and that the slightest movement

would now launch him into space. Still he did not hesitate, but allowed himself to glide on, murmuring, "If there is a God who watches over honest people, let Him open His eyes this instant!"

Providence was watching; and Bavois arrived at the end of his dangerous journey alive and safe. He fell like a mass of rock; and groaned aloud when at last, after a swift flight through space, he sank heavily on to the rugged soil below. For a minute he lay stunned and dizzy on the ground. He was rising when he felt himself seized by either arm. "No foolishness," he cried quickly. "It is I, Bavois."

But his captors did not loosen their hold. "How does it happen," asked one of them in a threatening tone, "that the Baron d'Escorval is precipitated half-way down the cliff and that you alight in safety a few moments later?"

The old soldier was too shrewd not to understand the import of this insinuation; and the indignation he felt gave him sufficient strength to free himself with a violent jerk from his captor's hand. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he cried; "so I pass for a traitor, do I? No, it is impossible; well, just listen to me." Then rapidly, but with great clearness, he recounted all the phases of his escape, his despair, his perilous situation, and the almost insurmountable obstacles which he had overcome. His tone was so sincere, the details he gave so circumstantial, that his questioners—two of the retired officers who had been waiting for the baron—at once held out their hands, sorry that they had wounded the feelings of a man so worthy of their respect and gratitude. "Forgive us, corporal," said one of them sadly. "Misery makes men suspicious and unjust, and we are very unhappy."

"No offense," he growled. "If I had trusted poor M. d'Escorval, he would be alive now."

"The baron still breathes," observed one of the officers.

This was such astounding news that for a moment Bavois was utterly confounded. "Ah! I will give my right hand, if necessary, to save him!" he exclaimed at last.

"If it is possible to save him, he will be saved, my friend. That worthy priest whom you see there is an excellent physician. He is examining M. d'Escorval's wounds at this moment. It was by his order that we procured and lighted that candle, which may bring our enemies upon us at any moment; but this is not a time for hesitation."

Bavois looked with all his eyes, but from where he was standing he could only distinguish a confused group of moving figures. On stepping forward, however, he perceived that Marie-Anne was holding a candle over the baron, who lay stretched upon the ground, his head reclining on his wife's knees. His face was not disfigured; but he was extremely pale, and his eyes were closed at intervals. He shuddered, and then the blood would trickle from his mouth. His clothing was hacked—literally hacked to pieces; and it was easy to see that he had been frightfully mauled and wounded. Kneeling beside the unconscious man, the Abbe Midon was dexterously stanching the blood and applying bandages, torn from the linen of those present. Maurice and one of the officers were assisting him. "Ah! if I had my hands on the scoundrel who cut the rope," cried the corporal with passionate indignation; "but patience. I shall have him yet."

"Do you know who it was?"

"Only too well!" He said no more. The abbe had done all it was possible to do, and was now lifting the wounded man a little higher on Madame d'Escorval's knees. This change of position elicited a moan which betrayed the baron's intense sufferings. He opened his eyes and faltered a few words—the first he had uttered. "Firmin!" he murmured, "Firmin!" This was the name of his former secretary, a devoted helpmate who had been dead for several years. It was evident that the baron's mind was wandering. Still he had some vague idea of his terrible situation, for in a stifled, almost inaudible, voice, he added: "Oh! how I suffer! Firmin, I will not fall into the hands of the Marquis de Courtornieu alive. I would rather kill myself."

This was all; his eyes closed again, and his head fell back a dead weight. The officers clustering round believed that he had expired, and it was with poignant anxiety that they drew the abbe aside. "Is it all over?" they asked. "Is there any hope?"

The priest shook his head sadly, and pointing to heaven: "My hope is in God!" he said reverently.

The hour, the place, the catastrophe, the present danger, the threatening future, all combined to impart solemnity to the priest's few words; and so profound was the impression that for a moment these men, familiar with death and peril, stood in awed silence. Maurice, who approached, followed by Cor-

poral Bavois, brought them back to the exigencies of the situation. "Ought we not to make haste and carry my father away?" he asked. "Mustn't we be in Piedmont before evening?"

"Yes!" exclaimed one of the officers; "let us start at once."

But the priest did not move, and it was in a despondent voice that he remarked: "Any attempt to carry M. d'Escorval across the frontier in his present condition would cost him his life."

This seemed so inevitably a death-warrant for them all that they shuddered. "My God! what shall we do?" faltered Maurice. "What course shall we adopt?"

No one replied. It was clear that they hoped for salvation through the priest alone. He was lost in thought, and it was some time before he spoke. "About an hour's walk from here," he said at last, "beyond the Croix d'Arcy, lives a peasant on whom I can rely. His name is Poignot, and he was formerly in M. Lacheneur's employ. With the assistance of his three sons, he now tills quite a large farm. We must procure a litter and carry M. d'Escorval to this honest peasant's house."

"What?" interrupted one of the officers, "you want us to procure a litter at this hour of the night, and in this neighborhood?"

"It must be done."

"But won't it awake suspicion?"

"Most assuredly."

"The Montagnac police will follow us."

"I am certain of it."

"The baron will be recaptured?"

"No." The abbe spoke in the tone of a man who, having assumed all the responsibility, feels that he has a right to be obeyed. "When the baron has been conveyed to Poignot's house," he continued, "one of you gentlemen will take the wounded man's place on the litter; the others will carry him, and the party will remain together until you have reached Piedmontese territory. Then you must separate and pretend to conceal yourselves, but do it in such a way that you are seen everywhere."

The priest's simple plan was readily understood. The royalist emissaries must be thrown off the track; and at the very moment when it seemed to them that the baron was in the mountains, he would be safe in Poignot's house.

"One word more," added the cure. "The party which will accompany the pretended baron must look as much like the people one would expect to find with him as possible. So

Mademoiselle Lacheneur will go with you, and Maurice also. Again, people know that I would not leave the baron; and as my priestly robe would attract attention, one of you must assume it. God will forgive the deception on account of its worthy motive."

It was now necessary to procure the litter; and the officers were trying to decide where they should go to obtain it when Corporal Bavois interrupted them. "Give yourselves no uneasiness," he remarked; "I know an inn not far from here where I can procure one."

He started off on the run, and a few minutes later returned with a small litter, a thin mattress, and a coverlid. He had thought of everything. The baron was lifted carefully from the ground and placed on the mattress—a long and difficult operation, which, in spite of extreme caution, provoked many terrible groans from the wounded man. When everything was ready, each officer took an end of the litter, and the little procession, headed by the abbe, started on its way. They were obliged to proceed slowly, as the least jolting increased the baron's sufferings. Still they made some progress, and by daybreak they were about half-way to Poignot's house. They then chanced to meet some peasants going to their daily toil. The latter paused to look at them, and when the group had passed by stood gazing curiously after these strange folks who were apparently carrying a dead body. However, these meetings did not at all seem to worry the Abbe Midon. At all events he made no attempt to avoid them. At last they came in sight of Poignot's cottage. There was a little grove not far from the house, and here the party halted, the priest bidding his companions conceal themselves while he went forward to reconnoitre and confer with the man upon whose decision the safety of the whole party depended.

As the priest approached the house, a short, slim peasant with gray hair and a sunburnt face emerged from the stable. This was Father Poignot himself. "What! is this you, Monsieur le Cure!" he exclaimed delightedly. "Heavens! how pleased my wife will be. We have a great favor to ask of you—" And then, without giving the abbe an opportunity to open his lips, the farmer began to relate his perplexities. The night of the revolt he had given shelter to a poor fellow who had received an ugly swordthrust. Neither his wife nor himself knew how to dress the wound, and he did not dare to send

for a doctor. "And this wounded man," he added, "is Jean Lacheneur, my old employer's son."

This recital made the priest feel very anxious. This peasant had already given an asylum to one wounded conspirator, but would he consent to receive another? He could not say, but his voice trembled as he presented his petition. The farmer turned very pale and shook his head gravely more than once, while the priest was speaking. When the abbe had finished, he coldly asked: "Do you know, sir, that I incur a great risk by converting my house into a hospital for these rebels?" The abbe dared not answer. "They told me," continued Father Poignot, "that I was a coward because I would not join in the revolt. Such was not my opinion. Now, however, I choose to shelter these wounded men. In my opinion, it requires quite as much courage to do that as to go and fight."

"Ah! you are a brave fellow!" cried the abbe.

"Never mind about that, but bring M. d'Escorval here. There is no one but my wife and boys, and they won't betray him!"

The offer was at once accepted, and half an hour later the baron was lying in a small loft, where Jean Lacheneur was already installed. From the window the Abbe Midon and Madame d'Escorval watched the little party, organized for the purpose of deceiving the Duc de Sairmeuse's spies, as it moved rapidly away. Corporal Bavois, with his head bound up with blood-stained linen, had taken the baron's place on the litter carried by the retired officers. These latter only knew the baron by name and reputation. But then he was the friend of their former ruler—the friend of that great captain whom they had made their idol, and they rejoiced with all their hearts when they saw him reposing under Father Poignot's roof in comparative security. After this there was the task of misleading the government emissaries, and they took various skilful precautions, not knowing that they were quite unnecessary. Public sentiment had declared itself in an unmistakable manner, and the police did not ascertain a single detail of the escape. They did not even hear of the little party that traveled nearly three leagues in the full light of day, bearing a wounded man upon a litter. Among the two thousand peasants who believed that this wounded man was the Baron d'Escorval, there was not one who turned informer or made an indiscreet remark.

The fugitives were ignorant of this willing connivance, and on approaching the frontier, which they heard was strictly guarded, they became extremely cautious. They waited until nightfall before presenting themselves at a lonely inn, where they hoped to procure a guide to lead them through the mountain passes. Sad news awaited them there, for the innkeeper informed them of the executions that had taken place that day at Montaignac, giving the particulars as he had heard them from an eye-witness. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he knew nothing of M. d'Escorval's flight or of M. Lacheneur's arrest. But he was well acquainted with Chanlouineau, and was quite inconsolable concerning the death of that "handsome young fellow, the best farmer in the country."

Finding this man's views so favorable, the officers, who had left the litter a short distance from the inn, decided to confide in him, at least in some degree. "We are carrying one of our wounded comrades," they said. "Can you guide us across the frontier to-night?"

The innkeeper replied that he would do so willingly, that he could promise to take them safely past the military posts; but that he could not think of starting before the moon rose. At midnight the fugitives were on their way, and at daybreak they set foot on the territory of Piedmont. They had dismissed their guide some time before. They now proceeded to break the litter to pieces; and handful by handful cast the wool of the mattress to the wind.

"Our task is accomplished," said one of the officers to Maurice. "We will now return to France. May God protect you! Farewell!"

It was with tears in his eyes that Maurice parted from these brave fellows who had proved so instrumental in saving his father's life. Now he was the sole protector of Marie-Anne, who, pale and overcome with fatigue and emotion, trembled on his arm. But no—for Corporal Bavois still lingered by his side. "And you, my friend," he asked sadly, "what are you going to do?"

"Follow you," replied the old soldier. "I have a right to a home with you; that was agreed between your father and myself! so don't hurry, for the young lady does not seem well, and I can see a village only a short distance off."





**E**SSENTIALLY a woman in grace and beauty, as well as in devotion and tenderness, Marie-Anne, as we have shown, was moreover capable of truly virile bravery. Her energy and coolness during those trying days had been the admiration and astonishment of all around her. But human endurance has its limits, and after excessive efforts there invariably comes a moment when the shrinking flesh fails the firmest will. Thus, when Marie-Anne tried to resume her journey she found that her strength was exhausted; her swollen feet and limbs scarcely supported her, her head whirled, and she shivered feverishly. Maurice and the old soldier were both obliged to support her, almost to carry her; but fortunately they were not far from a village, as was evident from an old church tower just discernible through the morning mist.

Soon, however, they distinguished several cottages, and with the prospect of speedy rest before them they were hastening forward, when suddenly Bavois stopped short. "A thousand thunderclaps!" he exclaimed; "why, I'm in uniform! It would excite suspicion at once if I went into the village dressed like this; before we had a chance to sit down, the Piedmontese gendarmes would arrest us." He reflected for a moment, twirling his mustache furiously; then, in a tone that would have made a passer-by tremble, he remarked: "All things are fair in love and war. The next person who passes—"

"But I have money with me," interrupted Maurice, unbuckling a belt filled with gold, which he had put on under his clothing on the night of the revolt.

"Eh! then we are fortunate!" cried Bavois. "Give me some, and I will soon find a shop where I can purchase a change of clothing."

He started; and it was not long before he reappeared clad in peasant's garb, his thin, weazened countenance well-nigh hidden by a large, broad-brimmed slouch-hat. "Now, steady,

forward, march!" he said to Maurice and Marie-Anne, who scarcely recognized him in this disguise.

What they had taken to be a mere village proved to be almost a small town, called Saliente, as they almost immediately afterward ascertained from a sign-post. The fourth house they met with was a hostelry, the Traveler's Rest. They went in, and at once asked the hostess to take the young lady to a room, and to assist her in undressing. While these instructions were being complied with, Maurice and the corporal proceeded to the dining-room and ordered something to eat. Refreshments were served at once, but the glances cast upon the new arrivals were by no means friendly. They were evidently regarded with suspicion. A tall man, who was apparently the landlord, hovered round them, and at last embraced a favorable opportunity to ask their names. "My name is Dubois," replied Maurice without the slightest hesitation. "I am traveling on business, and this man with me is a farmer of mine."

The landlord seemed somewhat reassured by this reply. "And what is your business?" he inquired.

"I have come into this land of inquisitive people to buy mules," laughed Maurice, striking his belt of money.

On hearing the jingle of the coin the landlord deferentially raised his cap. Breeding mules was the chief industry of the district. This would-be purchaser was very young, but he had a well-filled purse, and that was enough. "You will excuse me," resumed the landlord in quite a different tone. "You see, we are obliged to be very careful. There has been some trouble at Montaignac."

The imminence of the peril and the responsibility devolving upon him gave Maurice unusual assurance; and it was in the most careless, offhand manner possible that he concocted quite a plausible story to explain his early arrival on foot with his wife, who had been taken poorly on the way. He congratulated himself upon his address, but the old corporal was far from satisfied. "We are too near the frontier to bivouac here," he grumbled. "As soon as the young lady is on her feet again we must hurry on."

He believed, and Maurice hoped, that twenty-four hours' rest would set Marie-Anne right again. But they were both mistaken. She could not move, but remained in a state of torpor from which it was impossible to rouse her. When she was spoken to she made no reply, and it seemed very doubtful

whether she could even hear and understand. Fortunately the landlord's mother proved to be a good, kind-hearted old woman, who would not leave the so-called Madame Dubois's bedside, but nursed her with the greatest care during three long days, while Marie-Anne remained in this strange and alarming condition. When at last she spoke, Maurice could at first scarcely understand the import of her words. "Poor girl!" she sighed; "poor, wretched girl!" In point of fact she was alluding to herself. By a phenomenon which often manifests itself after a crisis in which reason has been temporarily imperiled, it seemed to her that it was some one else who had been the victim of all these misfortunes, the recollection of which gradually returned to her like the memory of a painful dream. What strange and terrible events had taken place since that August Sunday when, on leaving church with her father, she first heard of the Duc de Sairmeuse's return to France. And that was only nine months ago. What a difference between the past—when she lived happy and envied in that beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse, of which she believed herself the mistress—and the present, when she found herself lying in the comfortless room of a miserable country inn, attended by an old woman whom she did not know, and with no other protectors than her proscribed lover and an old soldier—a deserter whose life was in constant peril. Hope, fortune, and future happiness had all been wrecked, and she had not even saved her honor. But was she alone responsible? Who was it that had forced her to play that odious part with Maurice, Martial, and Chaulouineau? As this last name darted through her mind, she recalled with startling clearness all the incidents of her last meeting with the young farmer. She saw him at her feet in that dingy cell of the citadel at Montaignac; she felt his first and only kiss upon her cheek, and remembered that he had given her a second letter, saying as he did so: "You will read this when I am dead."

She might read it now, for he had already cruelly expiated his share in her father's enterprise. But then what had become of it? She had not given it a thought till now; but at present, raising herself up in bed, she exclaimed in an eager, imperious voice: "My dress, give me my dress."

The old nurse obeyed her, and Marie-Anne could not restrain an exclamation of delight when, on examining the pocket, she found the letter there. She opened it and read it slowly, then,

sinking back on her pillows, she burst into tears. Maurice hastily approached her. "What is the matter?" he inquired anxiously. Her only reply was to hand him the missive.

Chanlouineau, it should be remembered, was only a poor peasant, scarcely possessing the rudiments of education, as his letter (written on common paper and closed with a huge wafer, especially purchased from a grocer in Sairmeuse) evinced plainly enough. The heavy, labored, distorted characters had evidently been traced by a man who was more at home when guiding a plow than a pen. There was but one straight line, and every third word, at least, was misspelt. And yet the thoughts expressed were noble and generous, well worthy of the true heart that had beat in the young farmer's breast.

"Marie-Anne"—so the letter began. "The outbreak is at hand, and whether it succeeds or fails, at all events, I shall die. I decided that on the day when I learned that you could marry no other man than Maurice d'Escorval. The conspiracy can not succeed; and I understand your father well enough to know that he will not survive defeat. And if Maurice and your brother should both be killed, what would become of you? Oh, my God, would you not be reduced to beggary? The thought has haunted me continually. I have reflected, and this is my last will: I give and bequeath to you all my property, everything that I possess: My house, the Borderie, with its gardens and vineyards, the woodland and pastures of Berarde, and five lots of lands at Valrollier. An inventory of this property and of the other possessions I leave to you is deposited with the notary at Sairmeuse. You can accept this bequest without fear, for I have no relatives, and am at liberty to dispose of my belongings as I please. If you do not wish to remain in France, the property can be sold for at least forty thousand francs. But it would, it seems to me, be better for you to remain in your own province. The house on the Borderie is comfortable and convenient, for I have had it thoroughly repaired. Upstairs you will find a room that has been fitted up by the best upholsterer in Montaignac. I intended it for you. Under the hearthstone in this same room I have deposited a box containing three hundred and twenty-seven louis d'or and one hundred and forty-six livres. If you refuse this gift, it will be because you scorn me even after I am dead. Accept it, if not for your own sake, for the sake of—I dare not finish, but you will un-

derstand my meaning only too well. If Maurice is not killed, and I shall try my best to stand between him and danger, he will marry you. Then, perhaps, you will be obliged to ask his consent in order to accept my gift. I hope that he will not refuse his permission. One is not jealous of the dead! Besides, he knows well enough that you scarcely ever vouchsafed a glance to the poor peasant who loved you so much. Do not be offended at anything I have said, I am in such agony that I can not weigh my words. Farewell, Marie-Anne. Farewell forever.

CHANLOUINEAU."

Maurice read this letter carefully, at times pausing with suppressed emotion. After finishing its perusal he remained silent for a moment, and then in a husky voice exclaimed: "You can not refuse; it would be wrong." Then, fearing lest he might betray his feelings, he hastily left the room. Chanlouineau's words had evidently made a deep impression on his mind. This noble peasant had saved their lives at the Croix d'Arcy, he had wrested the Baron d'Escorval from the hands of the executioner, and he had never allowed either a complaint or a reproach to escape his lips. His abnegation had been sublime; and yet, as if what he had done in life were not sufficient, he sought to protect the woman he loved even after he was dead. When Maurice recalled all that he and Marie-Anne owed to Chanlouineau, he could not help reproaching himself with inferiority and unworthiness. But, good heavens! what if this same comparison should arise in Marie-Anne's mind as well? How could he compete with the memory of such nobility of soul and such self-sacrifice? Ay, Chanlouineau was mistaken; one may, perhaps, be jealous of the dead! However Maurice took good care to conceal his anxiety, and when he returned to Marie-Anne's room his face was calm and even cheerful.

Although, as we have seen, Marie-Anne had recovered the full possession of her mental faculties, her strength had not yet returned. She was almost unable to sit up; and Maurice had to relinquish all thought of leaving Saliente for the present. The so-called Madame Dubois's persistent weakness began to astonish the old nurse, and her faith in herbs, gathered by moonlight, was considerably shaken. Fortunately, however, Bavois had succeeded in finding a medical man in the neighborhood—a physician of great ability, who, after being at one time attached to Prince Eugene Beauharnais's viceregal court

at Milan, had, for political reasons, been forced to take refuge in this secluded spot. The corporal's discovery was a happy one, for in these days the smaller towns and villages of Italy rarely possessed any other doctors than some ignorant barber, who invariably treated all complaints with a lancet and a stock of leeches. Bavois's physician was at once summoned, and he promptly made his appearance. He was a man of uncertain age, with a furrowed brow and a keen and piercing glance. After visiting the sick-room, he drew Maurice aside. "Is this young lady really your wife, Monsieur—Dubois?" he asked, hesitating so strangely over his name, Dubois, that Maurice's face crimsoned to the roots of his hair.

"I do not understand your question," he retorted angrily.

"I beg your pardon, of course, but you seem very young for a married man, and your hands are too soft for a farmer's. And when I spoke to this young lady about her husband, she turned scarlet. The man who accompanies you, moreover, has terrible mustaches for a farmer, and besides you must remember that there have been troubles across the frontier at Montagnac."

From crimson Maurice had turned white. He felt that he was discovered—that he was in this man's power. What should he do? What was the use of denial? At times it is only prudent to confess, and extreme confidence often meets with sympathy and protection. He weighed these considerations in his mind, and then in an anxious voice replied: "You are not mistaken, monsieur. My friend and myself are both fugitives, undoubtedly condemned to death in France by this time." And then, without giving the doctor an opportunity to respond, he briefly narrated the terrible events that had recently happened at Sairmeuse. He neither concealed his own name nor Marie-Anne's and when his recital was completed, the physician, whom his confidence had plainly touched, warmly shook his hand.

"It is just as I supposed," said the medical man. "Believe me, Monsieur Dubois, you must not tarry here. What I have discovered others will discover as well. And, above everything, don't warn the hotel-keeper of your departure. He has not been deceived by your explanation. Self-interest alone has kept his mouth shut. He has seen your money, and so long as you spend it at his house he will hold his tongue; but if he discovers that you are going away, he will probably betray you."

"Ah! sir, but how is it possible for us to leave this place?"

"In two days the young lady will be on her feet again," interrupted the physician. "And take my advice. At the next village, stop and give your name to Mademoiselle Lacheneur."

"Ah! sir," exclaimed Maurice, "have you considered the advice you offer me? How can I, a proscribed man—a man condemned to death perhaps—how can I obtain, how can I display the proofs of identity necessary for marriage?"

"Excuse me," observed the physician, shaking his head, "but you are no longer in France, Monsieur d'Escorval; you are in Piedmont."

"Another difficulty!"

"No, because in this country people marry, or at least they can marry, without all the formalities that cause you so much anxiety."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Maurice.

"Yes, if you can find a consenting priest, when he has inscribed your name on his parish register and given you a certificate, you will be so undoubtedly married, Mademoiselle Lacheneur and yourself, that the court of Rome would never grant you a divorce."

"That may be," said Maurice hesitatingly, "but how could I find a priest—"

The physician was silent, and it might have been supposed he was blaming himself for meddling with matters that did not concern him. Suddenly, however, he abruptly said: "Listen to me attentively, Monsieur d'Escorval. I am about to take my leave, but before I go I shall find occasion to recommend your wife to take as much exercise as possible—I will do this in the landlord's presence. Consequently, on the day after tomorrow, Wednesday, you must hire mules, and you, Mademoiselle Lacheneur, and your old friend, the soldier, must start from the hotel as if you were going on a pleasure excursion. You will push on to Vigano, three leagues from here, where I live. Then I will take you to a priest, one of my friends; and upon my recommendation he will perform the marriage ceremony. Now, reflect, shall I expect you on Wednesday?"

"Oh, yes, yes. How can I ever thank you sufficiently?"

"By not thanking me at all. See, here is the innkeeper; you are M. Dubois again."

Maurice was intoxicated with joy. He understood the irregularity of such a marriage, but he knew it would reassure Marie-Anne's troubled conscience. Poor girl! she was suffer-

ing an agony of remorse. It was that which was killing her. However, he did not speak to her on the matter, fearing lest something might occur to interfere with the project. But the old physician had not spoken lightly, and everything took place as he had promised. The priest at Vigano blessed the marriage of Maurice d'Escorval and Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and, after inscribing their names upon the church register, he gave them a certificate, which the physician and Corporal Bavois signed as witnesses. That same evening the mules were sent back to Saliente, and the fugitives resumed their journey. The Abbe Midon had advised them to reach Turin as quickly as possible. "It is a large city," he had said when bidding them good-by near Father Poignot's house; "you will be lost in the crowd. I have several friends there, whose names and addresses are on this paper. Go to them, for through them I will try to send you news of M. d'Escorval."

So it was toward Turin that Maurice, Marie-Anne, and Corporal Bavois directed their steps. Their progress was slow, however, for they were obliged to avoid the more frequented roads and renounce all ordinary modes of transport. Still the fatigue of travel, instead of exhausting Marie-Anne, seemed to revive her, and when five or six days had elapsed the color came back to her cheeks, and her strength had fully returned. "Fate seems to have abandoned the pursuit," said Maurice one day. "Who knows but what the future may have many compensations in store for us!"

But he was mistaken. Fate far from forgetting them had merely granted them a short respite. One April morning the fugitives stopped to breakfast at an inn in the outskirts of a large town. Maurice had finished eating, and was just leaving the table to settle with the landlady, when Marie-Anne uttered a loud shriek and fell back on her chair. She held in her hand a French newspaper about a fortnight old, which she had found lying on the sideboard where some traveler had probably left it. Maurice seized the print rapidly, and read as follows: "Lacheneur, the leader of the revolt in Montaignac, was executed yesterday. The miserable mischief-maker exhibited on the scaffold the audacity for which he had always been famous."

"My father has been put to death!" cried Marie-Anne, "and I—his daughter—was not there to receive his last farewell!" She rose, and in an imperious voice: "I will go no farther,"



she said; "we must turn back now without losing an instant. I wish to return to France."

To return to France was to expose themselves to frightful peril. What good would it do? Was not the misfortune irreparable? So Corporal Bavois suggested, very timidly it is true, for the old soldier trembled at the thought that they might suspect him of being afraid. But Maurice would not listen. He shuddered. He did not know what had transpired since their flight, but it seemed to him that the Baron d'Escorval must have been discovered and rearrested at the same time that Lacheneur was captured. Accordingly they at once procured a vehicle to convey them to the frontier. One important question, however, remained to be decided. Should Maurice and Marie-Anne make their marriage public? She wished to do so, but Maurice with tears in his eyes entreated her to conceal it. "Our marriage certificate will not silence those who are disposed against us," said he. "Let us keep our secret for the present. No doubt we shall only remain in France for a few days." Unfortunately, Marie-Anne yielded. "Since you wish it," said she, "I will obey you. No one shall know of it."

It was the evening of the 17th of April, the same day that Martial was married to Blanche, when the fugitives at last reached Father Poignot's house. Maurice and Corporal Bavois were disguised as peasants, and the old soldier had made a sacrifice that drew tears from his eyes; he had shaved off his mustaches.



WHEN the Abbe Midon and Martial de Sairmeuse held their conference, to decide upon the arrangements for the Baron d'Escorval's escape, a difficulty presented itself which threatened to break off the negotiations. "Return my letter," said Martial, "and I will save the baron."

"Save the baron," replied the abbe, "and your letter shall be returned."

The idea that any one should suppose him to be influenced

by danger when in reality he was only yielding to Marie-Anne's tears, angered Martial beyond endurance. "These are my last words, sir," he retorted, emphatically. "Give me the letter now, and I swear to you, by the honor of my name, that I will do everything that is possible for any human being to do to save the baron. If you distrust my word, good evening."

The situation was desperate, the danger imminent, the time limited, and Martial's tone betrayed an inflexible determination. The abbe could not hesitate. He drew the letter from his pocket and handing it to Martial: "Here it is, sir," he said, solemnly, "remember that you have pledged the honor of your name."

"I will remember it, Monsieur le Cure. Go and obtain the ropes."

Thus the abbe's sorrow and amazement were intense, when, after the baron's terrible fall, Maurice declared that the cord had been cut beforehand. And yet the priest could not make up his mind that Martial was guilty of such execrable duplicity, which is rarely found in men under twenty-five years of age. However, no one suspected the abbe's secret thoughts. It was with perfect composure that he dressed the baron's wounds and made arrangements for the flight, though not until he saw M. d'Escorval installed in Poignot's house did he breathe freely. The fact that the baron had been able to endure the journey proved that he retained a power of vitality for which the priest had scarcely dared to hope. Some way must now be discovered to procure the surgical instruments and pharmaceutical remedies which the wounded man's condition would necessitate. But where and how could they be procured? The police kept a close watch over all the medical men and druggists in Montaignac, in hopes of discovering the wounded conspirators through one or the other medium. However, the cure had for ten years acted as physician and surgeon for the poor of his parish, and he possessed an almost complete set of surgical instruments, and a well-filled medicine chest. Accordingly at nightfall he put on a long blue blouse, concealed his features under a large slouch-hat, and wended his way toward Sairmeuse. There was not a single light in the parsonage; Bibiane, the old housekeeper, having gone out to gossip with some of the neighbors. The priest effected an entrance into the house by forcing the lock of the garden door; he speedily found the things he wanted and was able to retire without having been

perceived. That night the abbe hazarded a cruel but indispensable operation. His heart trembled, but although he had never before attempted so difficult a task, the hand that held the knife was firm. "It is not upon my weak powers that I rely," he murmured, "I have placed my trust in One who is on High."

His faith was rewarded. Three days later the wounded man, after a comfortable night, seemed to regain consciousness. His first glance was for his devoted wife, who was sitting by the bedside; his first word was for his son. "Maurice?" he asked.

"Is in safety," replied the abbe. "He must be on the road to Turin."

M. d'Escorval's lips moved as if he were murmuring a prayer; then, in a feeble voice: "We owe you a debt of gratitude which we can never pay," he murmured, "for I think I shall pull through."

He did "pull through," but not without terrible suffering, and not without severe lapses that made those around him tremble with anxiety. Jean Lacheneur was more fortunate, for he was on his legs by the end of the week.

On the evening of the seventeenth of April the abbe was seated in the loft reading a newspaper to the baron when suddenly the door was quietly opened, and one of the Poignot boys looked into the room. He did not speak, however, but merely gave the cure a glance, and then quickly withdrew.

The priest finished the paragraph he was perusing, laid down the paper, and went out on to the landing. "What's the matter?" he inquired.

"Ah!" answered the young fellow, "M. Maurice, Mademoiselle Lacheneur, and the old corporal have just arrived; they want to come upstairs."

Three bounds and the abbe reached the ground floor. "You imprudent children!" he exclaimed, addressing the three travelers, "what has induced you to return here?" Then turning to Maurice: "Isn't it enough that your father has nearly died for you and through you? Are you so anxious for his recapture that you return here to set our enemies on his track? Be off at once!"

Utterly abashed, it was as much as Maurice could do to falter his excuses; uncertainty, he said, had seemed worse to him than death; he had heard of M. Lacheneur's execution;

he had started off at once without reflection and only asked to see his father and embrace his mother before leaving again.

The priest was inflexible. "The slightest emotion might kill your father," he declared; "and I should cause your mother the greatest anxiety if I told her of your return, and the dangers to which you have foolishly exposed yourself. Come, go at once, and cross the frontier again this very night."

The scene had been witnessed by Jean Lacheneur, who now approached. "The time has come for me to take my leave," said he, "I shall go with Maurice. But I scarcely think that the highway's the right place for my sister. You would cap all your kindness, Monsieur le Cure, if you would only persuade Father Poignot to let her remain here, and if you would watch over her yourself."

The abbe deliberated for a moment, and then hurriedly replied: "So be it; but go at once; your name is not on the proscribed list. You will not be pursued."

Suddenly separated from his wife in this fashion, Maurice wished to confer with her, to give her some parting advice; but the abbe did not allow him an opportunity to do so. "Go, go at once," he insisted. "Farewell!"

The priest's intentions were excellent, no doubt, but in point of fact he was too hasty. At the very moment when Maurice stood sorely in need of wise and temperate counsel he was handed over to Jean Lacheneur's pernicious influence. Scarcely were they outside the house than the latter remarked: "We have to thank the Sairmeuses and the Marquis de Courtornieu for all this. I don't even know where they have thrown my father's corpse. I, his son, was even debarred from embracing him before he was traitorously murdered." He spoke in a harsh, bitter voice, laughing the while in a strange discordant fashion. "And yet," he continued, "if we climbed that hill we should be able to see the Chateau de Sairmeuse brightly illuminated. They are celebrating the marriage of Martial de Sairmeuse and Blanche de Courtornieu. We are friendless outcasts, succorless and shelterless, but they are feasting and making merry."

Less than this would have sufficed to rekindle Maurice's wrath. Yes, these Sairmeuses and these Courtornieus had killed the elder Lacheneur, and they had betrayed the Baron d'Escorval, and delivered him up—a mangled corpse—to his suffering relatives. "It would be a rightful vengeance to disturb their

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merrymaking now, and in the midst of hundreds of assembled guests denounce their cruelty and perfidy." "I will start at once," exclaimed Maurice, "I will challenge Martial in the presence of the revelers."

But Jean interrupted him. "No, don't do that! The cowards would arrest you. Write to the young marquis, and I will take your letter."

Corporal Bavois, who heard the conversation, did not make the slightest attempt to oppose this foolish enterprise. Indeed, he thought the undertaking quite natural, under the circumstances, and esteemed his young friends all the more for their rashness. They all three entered the first wine-shop they came across, and Maurice wrote the challenge which was confided to Jean Lacheneur.

The only object which Jean had in view was to disturb the bridal ball at the Chateau de Sairmeuse. He merely hoped to provoke a scandal which would disgrace Martial and his relatives in the eyes of all their friends; for he did not for one moment imagine that the young marquis would accept Maurice's challenge. While waiting for Martial in the hall of the chateau, he sought to compose a fitting attitude, striving to steel himself against the sneering scorn with which he expected the young nobleman would receive him. Martial's kindly greeting was so unlooked for that Jean was at first quite disconcerted, and he did not recover his assurance until he perceived how cruelly Maurice's insulting letter made the marquis suffer. When the latter seized him by the arm and led him upstairs, he offered no resistance; and as they crossed the brightly-lighted drawing-rooms and passed through the throng of astonished guests, his surprise was so intense that he forgot both his heavy shoes and peasant's blouse. Breathless with anxiety, he wondered what was coming. Then standing on the threshold of the little saloon leading out of the grand hall he heard Martial read Maurice d'Escorval's letter aloud, and finally saw him, frantic with passion, throw the missive in his father-in-law's face. It might have been supposed that these incidents did not in the least affect Jean Lacheneur, who stood by cold and unmoved, with compressed lips and downcast eyes. However, appearances were deceitful, for in reality his heart throbbed with exultation; and if he lowered his eyes, it was only to conceal the joy that sparkled in them. He had not hoped for so prompt and so terrible a revenge.

Nor was this all. After brutally pushing Blanche, his newly-wedded wife, aside when she attempted to detain him, Martial again seized Jean Lacheneur's arm. "Now," said he, "follow me!"

Jean still obeyed him without uttering a word. They again crossed the grand hall, and on passing out into an anteroom, Martial took a candle burning on a side table, and opened a little door leading to a private staircase. "Where are you taking me?" inquired Jean.

Martial, in his haste, was already a third of the way up the flight. "Are you afraid?" he asked, turning round.

The other shrugged his shoulders. "If you put it in that way, let us go on," he coldly replied.

They entered the room which Martial had occupied since taking possession of the chateau. It was the same room that had once belonged to Jean Lacheneur; and nothing in it had been changed. The whilom steward's son recognized the brightly-flowered curtains, the figures on the carpet, and even an old armchair ensconced wherein he had read many a novel in secret. Martial hastened to a small writing-desk, and drew therefrom a folded paper which he slipped into his pocket. "Now," said he, "let us be off. We must avoid another scene. My father and my wife will be looking for me. I will explain everything when we are outside."

They hastily descended the staircase, passed through the gardens, and soon reached the long avenue. Then Jean Lacheneur suddenly paused. "After all," said he, "it was scarcely necessary for me to wait so long for a simple yes or no. Have you decided? What answer am I to give Maurice d'Escorval?"

"None at all. You will take me to him. I must see him and speak with him in order to justify myself. Let us proceed!"

But Jean did not move. "What you ask is impossible!" he replied.

"Why so?"

"Because Maurice is pursued. If he is captured, he will be tried and undoubtedly condemned to death. He is now in a safe retreat, and I have no right to disclose it." In point of fact, Maurice's safe retreat, for the time being, was only a neighboring wood, where, in the corporal's company, he was waiting for Jean's return. But the latter could not resist the temptation to make this insinuating remark, which, by reason

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of its covert character, was far more insulting than if he had simply said: "We fear informers!"

Strange as it may appear, and proud and violent as was Martial's nature, he did not resent the insult. "So you distrust me!" he merely said. Jean Lacheneur was silent—another insult. "And yet," insisted Martial, "after what you've just seen and heard you can't possibly suspect me of having cut the ropes I carried to the baron."

"No! I'm convinced that *you* didn't do it."

"You saw how I punished the man who had dared to compromise my honor. And this man is the father of the girl I married to-day."

"Oh, I saw and heard everything, but as for taking you to Maurice, I must still reply: 'Impossible!'"

No doubt the younger Lacheneur's severity was unjust; however, Martial did not rebel against it. He merely drew from his pocket the paper which he had taken from his desk a few minutes previously, and handed it to Jean. "You doubt my word," he said grimly. "I shall not forget to punish those whose fault it is. However, here is a proof of my sincerity which I expect you to give to Maurice, and which must convince even you."

"What proof is it?"

"Why, the very letter in exchange for which we facilitated the baron's escape. A presentiment I can't explain prevented me from burning it, and now I'm very glad I didn't. Take it, and do what you choose with it."

Any one but Jean Lacheneur would have appreciated the young marquis's candor, and have been touched by the confidence he displayed. But Jean's hatred was implacable, and the more humble his enemy showed himself, the more determined he was to carry out the project of vengeance maturing in his brain. His only reply to Martial's last remark was a promise to give the letter to Maurice.

"It should be a bond of alliance, it seems to me," said Martial, gently.

"A bond of alliance!" rejoined Jean with a threatening gesture. "You are too fast, Monsieur le Marquis! Have you forgotten all the blood that flows between us? You didn't cut the ropes; but who condemned the Baron d'Escorval to death? Wasn't it your father, the Duc de Sairmeuse? An alliance! why, you must have forgotten that you and yours sent my

father to the scaffold! How have you rewarded the man whose honesty gave you back a fortune? By murdering him and ruining his daughter's reputation."

"I offered my name and fortune to your sister."

"I would have killed her with my own hand had she accepted your offer. Take that as a proof that I don't forget; and if any great disgrace ever tarnishes the proud name of Sairmeuse, think of Jean Lâcheneur. My hand will be in it." He was so frantic with passion that he forgot his usual caution. However, after a great effort he recovered his self-possession, and added in calmer tones: "If you are so desirous of seeing Maurice, be at La Reche to-morrow at noon. He will be there." With these words he turned abruptly aside, sprang over the fence skirting the avenue, and vanished into the darkness.

"Jean," cried Martial, in almost supplicating tones; "Jean, come back—listen to me!" There was no reply. The young marquis stood bewildered in the middle of the road; and little short of a miracle prevented his being run over by a horseman galloping in the direction of Montaignac. The latter's shouts to get out of the way awakened him from his dream, and as the cold night breeze fanned his forehead he was able to collect his thoughts and judge his conduct. Ah, there was no denying it. He, the professed skeptic, a man who, despite his youth, boasted of his indifference and insensibility, had forgotten all self-control. He had acted generously, no doubt, but after all he had created a terrible scandal, all to no purpose. When Blanche, his wife, had accused Marie-Anne of being the cause of his frenzy, she had not been entirely wrong. For though Martial might regard all other opinions with disdain, the thought that Marie-Anne despised him, and considered him a traitor and a coward, had, in truth, made him perfectly frantic. It was for her sake that on the impulse of the moment he had resorted to such a startling justification. And if he had begged Jean to lead him to Maurice d'Escorval, it was because he hoped to find Marie-Anne not far off, and to say to her: "Appearances were against me, but I am innocent; and have proved it by unmasking the real culprit." It was to Marie-Anne that he wished Chanlouineau's circular to be given, thinking that she, at least, would be surprised at his generosity. And yet all his expectations had been disappointed. "It will be the devil to arrange!" he thought; "but nonsense! it will be forgotten in a month. The best way is to face those gossips at



once: I will return immediately." He said: "I will return," in the most deliberate manner; but his courage grew weaker at each successive step he took in the direction of the chateau. The guests must have already left, and Martial concluded that he would probably find himself alone with his young wife, his father, and the Marquis de Courtornieu, whose reproaches, tears, and threats he would be obliged to encounter. "No," muttered he. "After all, let them have a night to calm themselves. I will not appear until to-morrow."

But where should he sleep? He was in evening dress and bareheaded, and the night was chilly. On reflection he recollected his father's house at Montaignac. "I shall find a bed there," he thought, "servants, a fire, and a change of clothing—and to-morrow, a horse to come back again." The walk was a long one, no doubt; however, in his present mood, this circumstance did not displease him. The servant who came to open the door when he knocked was at first speechless with astonishment. "You, Monsieur le Marquis!" he exclaimed at last.

"Yes, it's I. Light a good fire in the drawing-room, and bring me a change of clothes." The valet obeyed, and soon Martial found himself alone, stretched on a sofa in front of the blazing logs. "It would be a good thing to sleep and forget my troubles," he thought; and accordingly he tried to do so, but it was almost dawn when at last he fell into a feverish slumber.

He woke up again at nine o'clock, gave the necessary instructions for breakfast, and was eating with a good appetite, when suddenly he remembered his rendezvous with Maurice. He ordered a horse and set out at once, reaching La Reche at half-past eleven o'clock. The others had not yet arrived; so he fastened his horse by the bridle to a tree near by, and leisurely climbed to the summit of the hill. It was here that Lacheneur's cottage had formerly stood, and the four walls still remained standing, blackened by fire. Martial was gazing at the ruins, not without a feeling of emotion, when he heard the branches crackle in the adjacent cover. He turned, and perceived that Maurice, Jean, and Corporal Bavois were approaching. The old soldier carried under his arm, in a piece of green serge, a couple of swords which Jean Lacheneur had borrowed from a retired officer at Montaignac during the night. "We are sorry to have kept you waiting," began Maurice, "but you will

observe that it is not yet noon. Since we scarcely expected to see you—"

"I was too anxious to justify myself not to be here early," interrupted Martial.

Maurice shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "This is not a question of self-justification, but one of fighting," he abruptly replied.

Insulting as were the words and the gesture that accompanied them, Martial never so much as winced. "Grief has made you unjust," said he, gently, "or M. Lacheneur has not told you everything."

"Yes, Jean has told me everything."

"Well, then?"

Martial's coolness drove Maurice frantic. "Well," he replied, with extreme violence, "my hatred is unabated even if my scorn is diminished. I have waited for this occasion ever since the day we met on the square at Sairmeuse in Mademoiselle Lacheneur's presence. You said to me then: 'We shall meet again.' And now here we stand face to face. What insults must I heap upon you to decide you to fight?"

With a threatening gesture Martial seized one of the swords which Bavois offered him, and assumed an attitude of defense. "You will have it so," said he in a husky voice. "The thought of Marie-Anne can no longer save you."

But the blades had scarcely crossed before a cry from Jean arrested the combat. "The soldiers!" he exclaimed; "we are betrayed." A dozen gendarmes were indeed approaching at full speed.

"Ah! I spoke the truth!" exclaimed Maurice. "The coward came, but the guards accompanied him." He bounded back, and breaking his sword over his knee, hurled the fragments in Martial's face. "Here, miserable wretch!" he cried.

"Wretch!" repeated Jean and Corporal Bavois, "traitor! coward!" And then they fled, leaving Martial literally thunderstruck.

He struggled hard to regain his composure. The soldiers were swiftly approaching; he ran to meet them, and addressing the officer in command, imperiously inquired: "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes," replied the brigadier, respectfully, "you are the Duc de Sairmeuse's son."

"Very well! I forbid you to follow those men."

The brigadier hesitated at first; then in a decided tone he replied: "I can't obey you, sir. I have my orders." And turning to his men, he added, "Forward!"

He was about to set the example, when Martial seized him by the arm: "At least you will not refuse to tell me who sent you here?"

"Who sent us? The colonel, of course, in obedience to orders from the grand provost, M. d'Courtornieu. He sent the order last night. We have been hidden near here ever since daybreak. But thunder! let go your hold, I must be off."

He galloped away, and Martial, staggering like a drunken man, descended the slope, and remounted his horse. But instead of repairing to the Chateau of Sairmeuse, he returned to Montaignac, and passed the remainder of the afternoon in the solitude of his own room. That evening he sent two letters to Sairmeuse—one to his father, and the other to his wife.



MARTIAL certainly imagined that he had created a terrible scandal on the evening of his marriage; but he had no conception of the reality. Had a thunderbolt burst in these gilded halls, the guests at Sairmeuse could not have been more amazed and horrified than they were by the scene presented to their view. The whole assembly shuddered when Martial, in his wrath, flung the crumpled letter full in the Marquis de Courtornieu's face. And when the latter sank back into an armchair, several young ladies of extreme sensibility actually fainted away. The young marquis had departed, taking Jean Lacheneur with him, and yet the guests stood as motionless as statues, pale, mute, and stupefied. It was Blanche who broke the spell. While the Marquis de Courtornieu was panting for breath—while the Duc de Sairmeuse stood trembling and speechless with suppressed anger—the young marquise made an heroic attempt to save the situation. With her hand still aching from Martial's brutal clasp, her heart swelling with rage and hatred, and her face whiter than her bridal veil, she yet had

sufficient strength to restrain her tears and force her lips to smile. "Really this is placing too much importance on a trifling misunderstanding which will be explained to-morrow," she said, almost gaily, to those nearest her. And stepping into the middle of the hall she made a sign to the musicians to play a country dance.

But scarcely had the first note sounded, than, as if by unanimous consent, the whole company hastened toward the door. It might have been supposed that the chateau was on fire, for the guests did not withdraw, they actually fled. An hour previously, the Marquis de Courtornieu and the Duc de Sairmeuse had been overwhelmed with the most obsequious homage and adulation. But now there was not one in all the assembly daring enough to take them openly by the hand. Just when they both believed themselves all-powerful they were rudely precipitated from their lordly eminence. Indeed disgrace, and perhaps punishment, were to be their portion. Heroic to the last, however, the abandoned bride endeavored to stay the tide of retreating guests. Standing near the door, and with her most bewitching smile upon her lips, Blanche spared neither flattering words nor entreaties in her efforts to retain the deserters. The attempt was vain; and, in point of fact, many were not sorry of this opportunity to repay the young Marquise de Sairmeuse for all her past disdain and criticism. Soon, of all the guests, there only remained one old gentleman who, on account of his gout, had deemed it prudent not to mingle with the crowd. He bowed as he passed before Blanche, and could not even restrain a blush, for he rightly considered that this swift flight was a cruel insult for the abandoned bride. Still, what could he do alone? Under the circumstances, his presence would prove irksome, and so he departed like the others.

Blanche was now alone, and there was no longer any necessity for constraint. There were no more curious witnesses to enjoy her sufferings and comment upon them. With a furious gesture she tore her bridal veil and wreath of orange flowers from her head, and trampled them under foot. "Extinguish the lights everywhere!" she cried to a servant passing by, stamping her foot angrily, and speaking as imperiously as if she had been in her father's house and not at Sairmeuse. The lackey obeyed her, and then, with flashing eyes and disheveled hair, she hastened to the little drawing-room at the end of the hall.

Several servants stood round the marquis, who was lying back in his chair with a swollen, purple face, as if he had been stricken with apoplexy.

"All the blood in his body has flown to his head," remarked the duke, with a shrug of his shoulders. His grace was furious. He scarcely knew whom he was most angry with—with Martial or the Marquis de Courtornieu. The former, by his public confession, had certainly imperiled, if not ruined, their political future. But, on the other hand, the Marquis de Courtornieu had cast on the Sairmeuses the odium of an act of treason revolting to any honorable heart. The duke was watching the clustering servants with a contracted brow when his daughter-in-law entered the room. She paused before him, and angrily exclaimed: "Why did you remain here while I was left alone to endure such humiliation. Ah! if I had been a man! All our guests have fled, monsieur—all of them!"

M. de Sairmeuse sprang up. "Ah, well! what if they have. Let them go to the devil!" Among all the invited ones who had just left his house, there was not one whom his grace really regretted—not one whom he regarded as an equal. In giving a marriage feast for his son, he had invited all the petty nobility and gentry of the neighborhood. They had come—very well! They had fled—*bon voyage!* If the duke cared at all for their desertion, it was only because it presaged with terrible eloquence the disgrace that was to come. Still he tried to deceive himself. "They will come back again, madame," said he; "you will see them return, humble and repentant! But where can Martial be?"

Blanche's eyes flashed but she made no reply.

"Did he go away with the son of that rascal, Lacheneur?"

"I believe so."

"It won't be long before he returns—"

"Who can say?"

M. de Sairmeuse struck the mantelpiece with his clenched fist. "My God!" he exclaimed, "this is an overwhelming misfortune." The young wife believed that he was anxious and angry on her account. But she was mistaken; for his grace was only thinking of his disappointed ambition. Whatever he might pretend, the duke secretly admitted his son's intellectual superiority and genius for intrigue, and he was now extremely anxious to consult him. "He has wrought this evil," he murmured: "it is for him to repair it! And he is capable

of doing so if he chooses." Then, aloud, he resumed: "Martial must be found—he must be found—"

With an angry gesture Blanche interrupted him. "You must look for Marie-Anne Lacheneur if you wish to find my husband," said she.

The duke was of the same opinion, but he dared not admit it. "Anger leads you astray, marquise," said he.

"I know what I say," was the curt response.

"No, believe me, Martial will soon make his appearance. If he went away, he will soon return. The servants shall go for him at once, or I will go for him myself—"

The duke left the room with a muttered oath, and Blanche approached her father, who still seemed to be unconscious. She seized his arm and shook it roughly, peremptorily exclaiming, "Father, father!" This voice, which had so often made the Marquis de Courtornieu tremble, proved more efficacious than eau de Cologne. "I wish to speak with you," added Blanche: "do you hear me?"

The marquis dared not disobey; he slowly opened his eyes and raised himself from his recumbent position. "Ah! how I suffer!" he groaned, "how I suffer!"

His daughter glanced at him scornfully, and then in a tone of bitter irony remarked: "Do you think that I'm in paradise?"

"Speak," sighed the marquis. "What do you wish to say?"

The bride turned haughtily to the servants and imperiously ordered them to leave the room. When they had done so and she had locked the door: "Let us speak of Martial," she began.

At the sound of his son-in-law's name the marquis bounded from his chair with clenched fists. "Ah, the wretch!" he exclaimed.

"Martial is my husband, father."

"And you! after what he has done—you dare to defend him?"

"I don't defend him; but I don't wish him to be murdered."

At that moment the news of Martial's death would have given the Marquis de Courtornieu infinite satisfaction. "You heard, father," continued Blanche, "that young D'Escoval appointed a meeting for to-morrow, at midday, at La Reche. I know Martial; he has been insulted, and will go there. Will he encounter a loyal adversary? No. He will find a band of assassins. You alone can prevent him from being murdered."

"I—and how?"

"By sending some soldiers to La Reche, with orders to conceal themselves in the grove—with orders to arrest these murderers at the proper moment."

The marquis gravely shook his head. "If I do that," said he, "Martial is quite capable—"

"Of anything!—yes, I know it. But what does it matter to you, since I am willing to assume the responsibility?"

M. de Courtornieu looked at his daughter inquisitively, and if she had been less excited as she insisted on the necessity of sending instructions of Montaignac at once, she would have discerned a gleam of malice in his eye. The marquis was thinking that this would afford him an ample revenge, since he could easily bring dishonor on Martial, who had shown so little regard for the honor of others. "Very well, then; since you will have it so, it shall be done," he said, with feigned reluctance.

His daughter hastily procured ink and pens, and then with trembling hands he prepared a series of minute instructions for the commander at Montaignac. Blanche herself gave the letter to a servant, with directions to start at once; and it was not until she had seen him set off at a gallop that she went to her own apartment, that luxurious bridal chamber which Martial had so sumptuously adorned. But now its splendor only aggravated the misery of the deserted wife, for that she was deserted she did not for a moment doubt. She felt sure that her husband would not return, and had no faith whatever in the promises of the Duc de Sairmeuse, who at that moment was searching through the neighborhood with a party of servants. Where could the truant be? With Marie-Anne most assuredly—and at the thought a wild desire to wreak vengeance on her rival took possession of Blanche's heart. She did not sleep that night, she did not even undress, but when morning came she exchanged her snowy bridal robe for a black dress, and wandered through the grounds like a restless spirit. Most of the day, however, she spent shut up in her room, refusing to allow either the duke or her father to enter.

At about eight o'clock in the evening tidings came from Martial. A servant brought two letters; one sent by the young marquis to his father, and the other to his wife. For a moment Blanche hesitated to open the one addressed to her. It would determine her destiny, and she felt afraid. At last, however,

she broke the seal and read: "Madame—Between you and me all is ended; reconciliation is impossible. From this moment you are free. I esteem you enough to hope that you will respect the name of Sairmeuse, from which I can not relieve you. You will agree with me, I am sure, in thinking a quiet separation preferable to the scandal of legal proceedings. My lawyer will pay you an allowance befitting the wife of a man whose income amounts to five hundred thousand francs.—MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Blanche staggered beneath the terrible blow. She was indeed deserted—and deserted, as she supposed, for another. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "that creature! that creature! I will kill her!"

While Blanche was measuring the extent of her misfortune his grace the Duc de Sairmeuse raved and swore. After a fruitless search for his son he returned to the chateau, and began a continuous tramp to and fro in the great hall. On the morrow he scarcely ate, and was well-nigh sinking from weariness when his son's letter was handed him. It was very brief. Martial did not vouchsafe any explanation; he did not even mention the conjugal separation he had determined on, but merely wrote: "I can not return to Sairmeuse, and yet it is of the utmost importance that I should see you. You will, I trust, approve the resolution I have taken when I explain the reasons that have guided me in adopting it. Come to Montaignac, then, the sooner the better. I am waiting for you."

Had he listened to the prompting of his own impatience, his grace would have started at once. But he could not abandon the Marquis de Courtornieu and his son's wife in this abrupt fashion. He must at least see them, speak to them, and warn them of his intended departure. He attempted to do this in vain. Blanche had shut herself up in her own apartments, and remained deaf to all entreaties for admittance. Her father had been put to bed, and the physician who had been summoned to attend him, declared that the marquis was well-nigh at death's door. The duke was therefore obliged to resign himself to the prospect of another night of suspense, which was almost intolerable to such a nature as his. "However," thought he, "to-morrow, after breakfast, I will find some pretext to escape, without telling them I am going to see Martial."

He was spared this trouble, for on the following morning at about nine o'clock, while he was dressing, a servant came to inform him that M. de Courtornieu and his daughter were wait-



ing to speak with him in the drawing-room. Much surprised, he hastened downstairs. As he entered the room, the marquis, who was seated in an armchair, rose to his feet, leaning for support on Aunt Medea's shoulder; while Blanche, who was as pale as if every drop of blood had been drawn from her veins, stepped forward: "We are going, Monsieur le Duc," she said coldly, "and we wish to bid you farewell."

"What! you are going? Will you not—"

The young bride interrupted him with a mournful gesture, and drew Martial's letter from her bosom. "Will you do me the favor to peruse this?" she said, handing the missive to his grace.

The duke glanced over the short epistle, and his astonishment was so intense that he could not even find an oath. "Incomprehensible!" he faltered; "incomprehensible!"

"Incomprehensible, indeed," repeated the young wife sadly, but without bitterness. "I was married yesterday; to-day I am deserted. It would have been more generous to have reflected the evening before and not the next day. Tell Martial, however, that I forgive him for having destroyed my life, for having made me the most unhappy of women. I also forgive him for the supreme insult of speaking to me of his fortune. I trust he may be happy. Farewell, Monsieur le Duc, we shall never meet again. Farewell!"

With these words she took her father's arm, and they were about to retire when M. de Sairmeuse hastily threw himself between them and the door. "You shall not go away like this!" he exclaimed. "I will not suffer it. Wait at least until I have seen Martial. Perhaps he is not so guilty as you suppose—"

"Enough!" interrupted the marquis; "enough! This is one of those outrages which can never be repaired. May your conscience forgive you, as I myself forgive you. Farewell!"

This was said with such a conventional air of benevolence, and with such entire harmony of intonation and gesture, that M. de Sairmeuse was perfectly bewildered. With a dazed air he watched the marquis and his daughter depart, and they had been gone some moments before he recovered himself sufficiently to exclaim: "The old hypocrite! does he believe me to be his dupe?" His dupe! M. de Sairmeuse was so far from being his dupe that his next thought was: "What's going to follow this farce? If he says he forgives us, that means that he has some crushing blow in store for us." This idea soon

ripening into conviction made his grace feel apprehensive, for he did not quite see how he would cope successfully with the perfidious marquis. "But Martial is a match for him!" he at last exclaimed. "Yes, I must see Martial at once."

So great was his anxiety that he lent a helping hand in harnessing the horses he had ordered, and when the vehicle was ready he announced his determination to drive himself. As he urged the horses furiously onward, he tried to reflect, but the most contradictory ideas were seething in his brain, and he lost all power of looking at the situation calmly. He burst into Martial's room like a bombshell. "I certainly think you must have gone mad, marquis," he exclaimed. "That is the only valid excuse you can offer."

But Martial, who had been expecting the visit, had fully prepared himself for some such remark. "Never, on the contrary, have I felt more calm and composed in mind," he replied, "than I am now. Allow me to ask you one question. Was it you who sent the gendarmes to the meeting which Maurice d'Es-corval appointed?"

"Marquis!"

"Very well! Then it was another act of infamy to be scored against the Marquis de Courtornieu."

The duke made no reply. In spite of all his faults and vices, this haughty nobleman retained those characteristics of the old French aristocracy—fidelity to his word and undoubted valor. He thought it perfectly natural, even necessary, that Martial should fight with Maurice; and he considered it a contemptible proceeding to send armed soldiers to seize an honest and confiding opponent.

"This is the second time," resumed Martial, "that this scoundrel has tried to dishonor our name; and if I am to convince people of the truth of this assertion, I must break off all connection with him and his daughter. I have done so, and I don't regret it, for I only married her out of deference to your wishes, and because it seemed necessary for me to marry, and because all women, excepting one, who can never be mine, are alike to me."

Such utterances were scarcely calculated to reassure the duke. "This sentiment is very noble, no doubt," said he; "but it has none the less ruined the political prospects of our house."

An almost imperceptible smile curved Martial's lips. "I believe, on the contrary, I have saved them," replied he. "It

is useless for us to attempt to deceive ourselves; this affair of the insurrection has been abominable, and you ought to bless the opportunity this quarrel gives you to free yourself from all responsibility in it. You must go to Paris at once, and see the Duc de Richelieu—nay, the king himself, and with a little address, you can throw all the odium on the Marquis de Courtoirnieu, and retain for yourself only the prestige of the valuable services you have rendered."

The duke's face brightened. "Zounds, marquis!" he exclaimed; "that is a good idea! In the future I shall be infinitely less afraid of Courtoirnieu."

Martial remained thoughtful. "It is not the Marquis de Courtoirnieu that I fear," he murmured, "but his daughter—my wife."



**I**N the country, news flies from mouth to mouth with inconceivable rapidity, and, strange as it may seem, the scene at the Chateau de Sairmeuse was known of at Father Poignot's farmhouse that same night. After Maurice, Jean Lacheneur, and Bavois left the farm, promising to recross the frontier as quickly as possible, the Abbe Midon decided not to acquaint M. d'Escorval either with his son's return, or Marie-Anne's presence in the house. The baron's condition was so critical that the merest trifle might turn the scale. At about ten o'clock he fell asleep, and the abbe and Madame d'Escorval then went downstairs to talk with Marie-Anne. They were sitting together when Poignot's eldest son came home in a state of great excitement. He had gone out after supper with some of his acquaintances to admire the splendors of the Sairmeuse fete, and he now came rushing back to relate the strange events of the evening to his father's guests. "It is inconceivable!" murmured the abbe when the lad had finished his narrative. The worthy ecclesiastic fully understood that these strange events would probably render their situation more perilous than ever. "I can not understand," added he, "how Maurice could commit

such an act of folly after what I had just said to him. The baron has no worse enemy than his own son."

In the course of the following day the inmates of the farmhouse heard of the meeting at La Reche; a peasant who had witnessed the preliminaries of the duel from a distance being able to give them the fullest details. He had seen the two adversaries take their places, and had then perceived the soldiers hasten to the spot. After a brief parley with the young Marquis de Sairmeuse, they had started off in pursuit of Maurice, Jean, and Bavois, fortunately, however, without overtaking them; for this peasant had met the same troopers again five hours later, when they were harassed and furious; the officer in command declaring that their failure was due to Martial, who had detained them. That same day, moreover, Father Poignot informed the abbe that the Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu were at variance. Their quarrel was the talk of the district. The marquis had returned home with his daughter, and the duke had gone to Montaignac. The abbe's anxiety on receiving this intelligence was so intense that, strive as he might, he could not conceal it from the Baron d'Escorval. "You have heard some bad news, my friend," said the latter.

"Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Some new danger threatens us."

"None, none at all."

But the priest's protestations did not convince the wounded man. "Oh, don't deny it!" he exclaimed. "On the night before last, when you came into my room after I woke up, you were paler than death, and my wife had certainly been crying. What does all this mean?" As a rule, when the cure did not wish to reply to his patient's questions, it sufficed to tell him that conversation and excitement would retard his recovery; but this time the baron was not so docile. "It will be very easy for you to restore my peace of mind," he continued. "Confess now, you are afraid they may discover my retreat. This fear is torturing me also. Very well, swear to me that you will not let them take me alive, and then my mind will be at rest."

"I can't take such an oath as that," said the cure, turning pale.

"And why not?" insisted M. d'Escorval. "If I am recaptured, what will happen? They will nurse me, and then, as soon as I can stand on my feet, they will shoot me down again. Would it be a crime to save me from such suffering? You are my best friend; swear you will render me this supreme service.

Would you have me curse you for saving my life?" The abbe offered no verbal reply; but his eye, voluntarily or involuntarily, turned with a peculiar expression to the medicine chest standing upon the table near by.

Did he wish to be understood as saying: "I will do nothing myself, but you will find a poison there?"

At all events M. d'Escorval understood him so; and it was in a tone of gratitude that he murmured: "Thanks!" He breathed more freely now that he felt he was master of his life, and from that hour his condition, so long desperate, began steadily to improve.

Day after day passed by, and yet the abbe's gloomy apprehensions were not realized. Instead of fomenting reprisals, the scandal at the Chateau de Sairmeuse, and the imprudent temerity of which Maurice and Jean Lacheneur had been guilty, seemed actually to have frightened the authorities into increased indulgence; and it might have been reasonably supposed that they quite had forgotten, and wished every one else to forget, all about Lacheneur's conspiracy, and the slaughter which had followed it. The inmates of the farmhouse soon learned that Maurice and his friend the corporal had succeeded in reaching Piedmont; though nothing was heard of Jean Lacheneur, who had probably remained in France. However, his safety was scarcely to be feared for, as he was not upon the proscribed list. Later on it was rumored that the Marquis de Courtornieu was ill, and that Blanche, his daughter, did not leave his bedside; and then just afterward Father Poignot, returning from an excursion to Montaignac, reported that the Duc de Sairmeuse had lately passed a week in Paris, and that he was now on his way home with one more decoration—a convincing proof that he was still in the enjoyment of royal favor. What was of more importance was, that his grace succeeded in obtaining an order for the release of all the conspirators still detained in prison. It was impossible to doubt this news which the Montaignac papers formally chronicled on the following day. The abbe attributed this sudden and happy change of prospects to the quarrel between the duke and the Marquis de Courtornieu, and such indeed was the universal opinion in the neighborhood. Even the retired officers remarked: "The duke is decidedly better than he was supposed to be; if he was so severe, it is only because he was influenced by his colleague, the odious provost marshal."

Marie-Anne alone suspected the truth. A secret presentiment told her that it was Martial de Sairmeuse who was working all these changes, by utilizing his ascendancy over his father's mind. "And it is for your sake," whispered an inward voice, "that Martial is working in this fashion. He cares nothing for the obscure peasant prisoners, whose names he does not even know! If he protects them, it is only that he may have a right to protect you, and those whom you love!" With these thoughts in her mind she could but feel her aversion for Martial diminish. Was not his conduct truly noble? She had to confess it was, and yet the thought of this ardent passion which she had inspired never once quickened the throbbing of Marie-Anne's heart. Alas! it seemed as if nothing were capable of touching her heart now. She was but the ghost of her former self. She would sit for whole days motionless in her chair, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, her lips contracted as if by a spasm, while great tears rolled silently down her cheeks. The Abbe Midon, who was very anxious on her account, often tried to question her. "You are suffering, my child," he said kindly one afternoon. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Cure. I am not ill."

"Won't you confide in me? Am I not your friend? What do you fear?"

She shook her head sadly and replied: "I have nothing to confide." She said this, and yet she was dying of sorrow and anguish. Faithful to the promise she had made to Maurice, she had never spoken of her condition, or of the marriage solemnized in the little church at Vigano. And she saw with inexpressible terror the moment when she could no longer keep her secret slowly approaching. Her agony was frightful, but what could she do? Fly! but where could she go? And by going, would she not lose all chance of hearing from Maurice, which was the only hope that sustained her in this trying hour? Still she had almost determined on flight when circumstances—providentially, it seemed to her—came to her aid.

Money was needed at the farm. The fugitives were unable to obtain any without betraying their whereabouts, and Father Poignot's little store was almost exhausted. The Abbe Midon was wondering what they could do, when Marie-Anne told him of the will which Chanlouineau had made in her favor, and of the money concealed under the hearthstone in the room on the first floor. "I might go to the Borderie one night," she suggested,

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"enter the house, which is unoccupied, obtain the money and bring it here. I have a right to do so, haven't I?"

"You might be seen," replied the priest, "and—who knows?—perhaps arrested. If you were questioned, what plausible explanation could you give?"

"What shall I do, then?"

"Act openly; you yourself are not compromised. You must appear at Sairmeuse to-morrow as if you had just returned from Piedmont; go at once to the notary, take possession of your property, and instal yourself at the Borderie."

Marie-Anne shuddered. "What, live in Chantouineau's house?" she faltered. "Live there alone?"

"Heaven will protect you, my dear child. I can only see an advantage in your living at the Borderie. It will be easy to communicate with you; and with ordinary precautions there can be no danger. Before you start we will decide on a meeting place, and two or three times a week you can join Father Poignot there. And in the course of two or three months you can be still more useful to us. When people have grown accustomed to your living at the Borderie, we will take the baron there. Such an arrangement would hasten his convalescence; for in the narrow loft, where we are obliged to conceal him now, he is really suffering for want of light and air."

Accordingly it was decided that Father Poignot should accompany Marie-Anne to the frontier that very night; and that she should take the diligence running between Piedmont and Montaignac, *via* Sairmeuse. Before she started, the Abbe Midon gave her minute instructions as to the story she should tell of her sojourn in foreign lands. The peasantry, possibly even the authorities, would question her, and all her answers must tend to prove that the Baron d'Escorval was concealed near Turin.

The plan was carried out as projected; and at eight o'clock on the following morning, the people of Sairmeuse were greatly astonished to see Marie-Anne alight from the passing diligence. "M. Lacheneur's daughter has come back again!" they exclaimed. The words flew from lip to lip with marvelous rapidity, and soon all the villagers stood at their doors and windows watching the poor girl as she paid the driver, and entered the local hostelry, followed by a lad carrying a small trunk. Urban curiosity has some sense of shame, and seeks to hide itself when prying into other people's affairs, but country folks are openly and outrageously inquisitive. Thus when Marie-Anne

emerged from the inn, she found quite a crowd of sightseers awaiting her with gaping mouths and staring eyes. And fully a score of chattering gossips thought fit to escort her to the notary's door. This notary was a man of importance, and he welcomed Marie-Anne with all the deference due to the heiress of a house and farm worth from forty to fifty thousand francs. However, being jealous of his renown for perspicuity, he gave her clearly to understand that, as a man of experience, he fully divined that love alone had influenced Chanlouineau in drawing up this last will and testament. He was no doubt anxious to obtain some information concerning the young farmer's passion, and Marie-Anne's composure and reticence disappointed him immensely.

"You forget what brings me here," she said; "you don't tell me what I have to do!"

The notary, thus interrupted, made no further attempts at divination. "Plague on it!" he thought, "she is in a hurry to get possession of her property—the avaricious creature!" Then he added aloud: "The business can be finished at once, for the magistrate is at liberty to-day, and can go with us to break the seals this afternoon."

So, before evening, all the legal requirements were complied with, and Marie-Anne was formally installed at the Borderie. She was alone in Chanlouineau's house, and as the darkness gathered round her, a great terror seized hold of her heart. She fancied that the doors were about to open, that this man who had loved her so much would suddenly appear before her, and that she should hear his voice again as she heard it for the last time in his grim prison cell. She struggled hard against these foolish fears, and at last, lighting a lamp, she ventured to wander through his house—now hers—but wherein everything spoke so forcibly of its former owner. She slowly examined the different rooms on the ground floor, noting the recent repairs and improvements, and at last climbed the stairs to the room above which Chanlouineau had designed to be the altar of his love. Strange as it may seem, it was really luxuriously upholstered—far more so than Chanlouineau's letter had led her to suppose. The young farmer, who for years had breakfasted off a crust and an onion, had lavished a small fortune on this apartment, which he meant to be his idol's sanctuary.

"How he loved me!" murmured Marie-Anne, moved by that



emotion, the bare thought of which had awakened Maurice's jealousy. But she had neither the time nor the right to yield to her feelings. At that very moment Father Poignot was no doubt waiting for her at the appointed meeting-place. Accordingly, she swiftly raised the hearthstone, and found the money which Chanlouineau had mentioned. She handed the larger part of it to Poignot, who in his turn gave it to the abbe on reaching home.

The days that followed were peaceful ones for Marie-Anne, and this tranquillity, after so many trials, seemed to her almost happiness. Faithful to the priest's instructions, she lived alone; but, by frequent visits to Sairmeuse, she accustomed people to her presence. Yes, she would have been almost happy if she could only have had some news of Maurice. What had become of him? Why did he give no sign of life? She would have given anything in exchange for one word of love and counsel from him. Soon the time approached when she would require a confidant; and yet there was no one in whom she dared confide. In her dire need she at last remembered the old physician at Vigano, who had been one of the witnesses at her marriage. She had no time to reflect whether he would be willing or not; but wrote to him immediately, entrusting her letter to a youth in the neighborhood. "The gentleman says you may rely upon him," said the lad on his return. And that very evening Marie-Anne was roused by a rap at her door. It was the kind-hearted old man, who had hastened to her relief. He remained at the Borderie nearly a fortnight, and when he left one morning before daybreak, he took away with him under his cloak an infant—a little boy—whom he had sworn to cherish as his own child.



**I**T had cost Blanche an almost superhuman effort to leave Sairmeuse without treating the duke to a display of violence, such as would have fairly astonished even that irascible nobleman. She was tortured with inward rage at the very moment,

when, with an assumption of melancholy dignity, she murmured the words of forgiveness we have previously recorded. But vanity, after all, was more powerful than resentment. She thought of the gladiators who fall in the arena with a smile on their lips, and resolved that no one should see her weep, that no one should hear her threaten or complain. Indeed, on her return to the Chateau de Courtornieu her behavior was truly worthy of a stoic philosopher. Her face was pale, but not a muscle of her features moved as the servants glanced at her inquisitively. "I am to be called mademoiselle as formerly," she said imperiously. "Any of you forgetting this order will be at once dismissed."

One maid did forget the injunction that very day, addressing her young mistress as "madame," and the poor girl was instantly dismissed, in spite of her tears and protestations. All the servants were indignant. "Does she hope to make us forget that she's married, and that her husband has deserted her?" they queried.

Ah! that was what she wished to forget herself. She wished to annihilate all recollection of the day that had seen her successively maiden, wife, and widow. For was she not really a widow? A widow, not by her husband's death, it is true; but, thanks to the machinations of an odious rival, an infamous, perfidious creature, lost to all sense of shame. And yet, though she had been disdained, abandoned, and repulsed, she was no longer free. She belonged to this man whose name she bore like a badge of servitude—to this man who hated her, who had fled from her. She was not yet twenty; still her youth, her hopes, her dreams were ended. Society condemned her to seclusion, while Martial was free to rove wheresoever he listed. It was now that she realized the disadvantages of isolation. She had not been without friends in her schoolgirl days; but after leaving the convent she had estranged them by her haughtiness, on finding them not as high in rank or as wealthy as herself. So she was now reduced to the irritating consolations of Aunt Mœde, a very worthy person, no doubt, but whose tears flowed as freely for the loss of a cat as for the death of a relative. However, Blanche firmly persevered in her determination to conceal her grief and despair in the deepest recesses of her heart. She drove about the country, wore her prettiest dresses, and forced herself to assume a gay and indifferent air. But on going to church at Sairmeuse on the

following Sunday she realized the futility of her efforts. Her fellow worshipers did not look at her haughtily, or even inquisitively, but they turned aside to smile, and she overheard remarks concerning "the maiden widow" which pierced her very soul. So she was an object of mockery and ridicule. "Oh! I will have my revenge!" she muttered to herself.

She had indeed already thought of vengeance; and had found her father quite willing to assist her. For the first time the father and the daughter shared the same views. "The Duc de Sairmeuse shall learn what it costs to favor a prisoner's escape and to insult a man like me," said the Marquis bitterly. "Fortune, favor, position—he shall lose everything, and I will not rest content till I see him ruined and dishonored at my feet. And, mind me, that day shall surely come!"

Unfortunately, however, for M. de Courtornieu's project, he was extremely ill for three days after the scene at Sairmeuse; and then he wasted three days more in composing a report, which was intended to crush his former ally. This delay ruined him, for it gave Martial time to perfect his plans, and to despatch the Duc de Sairmeuse to Paris with full instructions. And what did the duke say to the king, who gave him such a gracious reception? He undoubtedly pronounced the first reports to be false, reduced the rising at Montaignac to its proper proportions, represented Lacheneur as a fool, and his followers as inoffensive idiots. It was said, moreover, that he led his majesty to suppose that the Marquis de Courtornieu might have provoked the outbreak by undue severity. He had served under Napoleon, and had possibly thought it necessary to make a display of his zeal, so that his past apostasy might be forgotten. As far as the duke himself was concerned, he deeply deplored the mistakes into which he had been led by his ambitious colleague, on whom he cast most of the responsibility of so much bloodshed. To be brief, the result of the duke's journey was, that when the Marquis de Courtornieu's report reached Paris, it was answered by a decree depriving him of his office as provost-marshal of the province.

This unexpected blow quite crushed the old intriguer. What! he had been duped in this fashion, he so shrewd, so adroit, so subtle-minded and quick-witted; he who had successfully battled with so many storms; who, unlike most of his fellow patriots, had been enriched, not impoverished, by the Revolution, and who had served with the same obsequious countenance each

master who was willing to accept his services. "It must be that old imbecile, the Duc de Sairmeuse, who has manœuvred so skilfully," he groaned. "But who advised him? I can't imagine who it could have been."

Who it was Blanche knew only too well. Like Marie-Anne, she recognized Martial's hand in all this business. "Ah! I was not deceived in him," she thought; "he is the great diplomatist I believed him to be. To think that at his age he has outwitted my father, an old politician of such experience and acknowledged skill! And he does all this to please Marie-Anne," she continued, frantic with rage. "It is the first step toward obtaining pardon for that vile creature's friends. She has unbounded influence over him, and so long as she lives there is no hope for me. But patience, my time will come."

She had not yet decided what form the revenge she contemplated should take; but she already had her eye on a man who she believed would be willing to do anything for money. And, strange as it may seem, this man was none other than our old acquaintance, Father Chupin. Burdened with remorse, despised and jeered at, stoned whenever he ventured in the streets, and horror-stricken whenever he thought of Balstain's vow, Chupin had left Montaignac and sought an asylum at the Chateau de Sairmeuse. In his ignorance he fancied that the great nobleman who had incited him to discover Lacheneur owed him, over and above the promised reward, all needful aid and protection. But the duke's servants shunned the so-called traitor. He was not even allowed a seat at the kitchen table, nor a straw pallet in the stables. The cook threw him a bone, as he would have thrown it to a dog; and he slept just where he could. However, he bore all these hardships uncomplainingly, deeming himself fortunate in being able to purchase comparative safety even at such a price. But when the duke returned from Paris with a policy of forgetfulness and conciliation in his pocket, his grace could no longer tolerate in his establishment the presence of a man who was the object of universal execration. He accordingly gave instructions for Chupin to be dismissed. The latter resisted, however, swearing that he would not leave Sairmeuse unless he were forcibly expelled or unless he received the order from the lips of the duke himself. This obstinate resistance was reported to the duke, and made him hesitate; but a word from Martial concerning the necessities of the situation eventually decided him.

He sent for Chupin and told him that he must not visit Sairmeuse again under any pretext whatever, softening the harshness of expulsion, however, by the offer of a small sum of money. But Chupin, sullenly refusing the proffered coins, gathered his belongings together and departed, shaking his clenched fist at the chateau, and vowing vengeance on the Sairmeuse family. He then went to his old home, where his wife and his two boys still lived. He seldom left this filthy den, and then only to satisfy his poaching proclivities. On these occasions, instead of stealthily firing at a squirrel or a partridge from some safe post of concealment, as he had done in former times, he walked boldly into the Sairmeuse or the Courtornieu forests, shot his game, and brought it home openly, displaying it in an almost defiant manner. He spent the rest of his time in a state of semi-intoxication, for he drank constantly, and more and more immoderately. When he had taken more than usual, his wife and his sons usually attempted to obtain money from him, and if persuasion failed they often resorted to blows. For he had never so much as shown them the blood-money paid to him for betraying Lacheneur; and though he had squandered a small sum at Montaignac, no one knew what he had done with the great bulk of the twenty thousand francs in gold paid to him by the Duc de Sairmeuse. His sons believed he had buried it somewhere; but they tried in vain to wrest his secret from him. All the people in the neighborhood were aware of this state of affairs, and one day when the head gardener at Courtornieu was telling the story to two of his assistants, Blanche, seated on a bench near by, chanced to overhear him.

"Ah, he's an old scoundrel!" said the gardener indignantly. "And he ought to be at the galleys, instead of at large among respectable people."

At the same moment the voice of hatred was whispering to Blanche: "That's the man to serve your purpose." But how an opportunity was to be found to confer with him? she wondered, being too prudent to think of hazarding a visit to his house. However, she remembered that he occasionally went shooting in the Courtornieu woods, and that it might be possible for her to meet him there. "It will only require," thought she, "a little perseverance and a few long walks." But, in point of fact, it cost poor Aunt Medea, the inevitable chaperon, two long weeks of almost constant perambulation. "Another

freak!" groaned the impoverished relative, overcome with fatigue; "my niece is certainly crazy!"

However, at last, one lovely afternoon in May, Blanche came across the object of her quest. She chanced to be standing in a sequestered nook high the mere, situated in the depths of the forest of Courtornieu, when she perceived Chupin, tramping sullenly along with his gun in his hand and glancing suspiciously on either side. Not that he feared either gamekeeper or judicial proceedings, but go wherever he would, still and over he fancied he could see Balstain, the Piedmontese innkeeper, walking in his shadow and brandishing the terrible knife which, by Saint-Jean-de-Coche, he had consecrated to his vengeance. Seeing Blanche in turn, the old rascal would have fled into the cover, but before he could do so she had called to him: "Eh, Father Chupin!"

He hesitated for a moment, then paused, dropped his gun, and waited.

Aunt Medea was pale with fright. "Blessed Jesus!" she murmured, pressing her niece's arm; "what are you calling that terrible man for?"

"I want to speak to him."

"What, Blanche, do you dare—"

"I must!"

"No, I can't allow it. I must not—"

"There, that's enough!" said Blanche with one of those imperious glances that deprive a dependent of all strength and courage; "quite enough." Then, in gentler tones: "I *must* talk with this man," she added. "And you, Aunt Medea, must remain some little distance off. Keep a close watch on every side, and if you see any one approaching, call me at once."

Aunt Medea, submissive as was her wont, immediately obeyed; and Blanche walked straight toward the old poacher. "Well, my good Father Chupin, and what sort of sport have you had to-day?" she began directly she was a few steps from him.

"What do you want with me?" growled Chupin; "for you do want something, or you wouldn't trouble yourself about a man like me."

The old ruffian's manner was so surly and aggressive that Blanche needed all her strength of mind to carry out her purpose. "Yes, it is true that I have a favor to ask you," she replied in a resolute tone.

"Ah, ha! I supposed so."

"A mere trifle, which will cost you no trouble, and for which you shall be well paid." She said this so carelessly that an ordinary person would have supposed she was really asking for some unimportant service; but cleverly as she played her part, Chupin was not deceived.

"No one asks trifling services of a man like me," he said coarsely. "Since I served the good cause, at the peril of my life, people seem to suppose they've a right to come to me with money in their hands whenever they want any dirty work done. It's true that I was well paid for that other job; but I would like to melt all the gold and pour it down the throats of those who gave it to me. Ah! I know now what it costs the poor to listen to the words of the great! Go your way, and if you have any wickedness in your head, do it yourself!"

He shouldered his gun and was moving off when Blanche coldly observed: "It was because I knew of your wrongs that I stopped you; I thought you would be glad to serve me, because I hate the Sairmeuses as you do."

These words excited the old poacher's interest, and he paused. "I know very well that you hate the Sairmeuses now—but—"

"But what?"

"Why, in less than a month you will be reconciled. And then that old wretch, Chupin—"

"We shall never be reconciled."

"Hum!" growled the wily rascal after deliberating a while. "And if I do assist you, what compensation will you give me?"

"I will give you whatever you wish for—money, land, a house—"

"Many thanks. I want something quite different."

"What do you want then? Tell me."

Chupin reflected for a moment, and then replied: "This is what I want. I have a good many enemies, and I don't even feel safe in my own house. My sons abuse me when I've been drinking, and my wife is quite capable of poisoning my wine. I tremble for my life and for my money. I can't endure such an existence much longer. Promise me an asylum at the Chateau de Courtornieu and I'm yours. I shall be safe in your house. But let it be understood I won't be ill-treated by the servants as I was at Sairmeuse."

"Oh, I can promise you all that."

"Swear it then by your hope of heaven."

"I swear it."

There was such evident sincerity in her accent that Chupin felt reassured. He leaned toward her, and in a low voice remarked: "Now tell me your business." His small gray eyes glittered in a threatening fashion; his thin lips were drawn tightly over his sharp teeth; he evidently expected some proposition of murder, and was ready to accomplish it.

His attitude evinced his feelings so plainly that Blanche shuddered. "Really, what I want of you is almost nothing," she replied. "I only want you to watch the Marquis de Sairmeuse."

"Your husband."

"Yes; my husband. I want to know what he does, where he goes, and what persons he sees; I want to know how he spends all his time."

"What! now is that really all you want me to do?" asked Chupin eagerly.

"For the present, yes. My plans are not yet decided; but circumstances will guide me."

"You can rely upon me," replied Chupin at once; "but I must have a little time."

"Yes, I understand that. To-day is Saturday; can you give me a first report on Thursday?"

"In five days? Yes, probably."

"In that case, meet me here on Thursday, at the same hour."

The conversation might have continued a few moments longer, but at this very moment Aunt Medea was heard exclaiming: "Some one is coming!"

"Quick! we must not be seen together. Conceal yourself," ejaculated Blanche, and while the old poacher disappeared with one bound into the forest, she hastily rejoined her chaperone. A few paces off she could perceive one of her father's servants approaching.

"Ah! mademoiselle," exclaimed the lackey, "we have been looking for you everywhere during the last three hours. Your father, M. le Marquis—good heavens! what a misfortune! A physician has been sent for."

"Whatever has happened? Is my father dead?"

"No, mademoiselle, no; but—how can I tell you? When the marquis went out this morning his actions were very strange, and—and—when he returned—" As he spoke, the servant tapped his forehead with his forefinger. "You understand me,



mademoiselle—when he came home his reason seemed to—to have left him!”

Without waiting for the servant to finish, or for her terrified aunt to follow her, Blanche darted off in the direction of the chateau. “How is the marquis?” she inquired of the first servant she met.

“He is in bed, and is quieter than he was,” answered the maid.

But Blanche had already reached her father’s room. He was sitting up in bed, under the supervision of his valet and a footman. His face was livid, and a white foam had gathered on his lips. Still, he recognized his daughter. “Here you are,” said he. “I was waiting for you.”

She paused on the threshold, and though she was neither tender-hearted nor impressionable, the sight seemed to appal her: “My father!” she faltered. “Good heavens! what has happened?”

“Ah, ha!” exclaimed the marquis, with a discordant laugh. “I met him! what, you doubt me? I tell you that I saw the wretch. I know him well; haven’t I seen his cursed face before my eyes for more than a month?—for it never leaves me. I saw him. It was in the forest near the Sanguille rocks. You know the place; it is always dark there, on account of the trees. I was slowly walking home thinking of him, when suddenly he sprang up before me, holding out his arms as if to bar my passage. ‘Come,’ said he, ‘you must join me.’ He was armed with a gun; he fired—”

The marquis paused, and Blanche summoned up sufficient courage to approach him. For more than a minute she looked at him attentively, with a cold, magnetic glance, such as often exercises great influence over those who have lost their reason, then shaking him roughly by the arm, she exclaimed: “Control yourself, father. You are the victim of an hallucination. It is impossible that you can have seen the man you speak of.”

Blanche knew only too well who was the man that M. de Courtornien alluded to; but she dared not, could not, utter his name.

However, the marquis had resumed his scarcely coherent narrative. “Was I dreaming?” he continued. “No, it was Lacheneur, Lacheneur and none other who stood in front of me. I am sure of it, and the proof is that he reminded me of a circumstance which occurred in my youth, and which was known

only to him and me. It happened during the Reign of Terror. He was all-powerful in Montaignac; and I was accused of being in correspondence with the *emigres*. My property had been confiscated; and I was every moment expecting to feel the executioner's hand on my shoulder, when Lacheneur took me to his house. He concealed me; furnished me with a passport; saved my money, and saved my life as well; and yet—and yet I sentenced him to death. That's the reason why I've seen him again. I must join him; he told me so—I'm a dying man!" With these words the marquis fell back on his pillows, pulled the bedclothes over his face, and lay there so rigid and motionless that one might readily have supposed the counterpane covered some inanimate corpse.

Mute with horror, the servants exchanged frightened glances. Such baseness and ingratitude amazed them. They could not understand why, under such circumstances, the marquis had not pardoned Lacheneur. Blanche alone retained her presence of mind. Turning to her father's valet, she said: "Hasn't some one tried to injure my father?"

"I beg your pardon, mademoiselle, some one most certainly has: a little more and Monsieur le Marquis would have been killed."

"How do you know that?"

"In undressing the marquis I noticed that he had received a wound in the head. I also examined his hat, and I found three holes in it, which could only have been made by bullets."

"Then some one must have tried to murder my father," murmured Blanche, "and this attack of delirium has been brought on by fright. How can we find out who the would-be murderer was?"

The valet shook his head. "I suspect that old poacher, who is always prowling about here, a man named—Chupin."

"No, it couldn't have been he."

"Ah! I am almost sure of it. There's no one else in the neighborhood capable of such an evil deed."

Blanche could not give her reasons for declaring Chupin innocent. Nothing in the world would have induced her to admit that she had met him, talked with him for more than half an hour, and only just parted from him. So she remained silent.

Soon afterward the medical man arrived. He removed the coverlet from M. de Courtornieu's face, being almost com-

pelled to use force in doing so—examined the patient with evident anxiety, and then ordered mustard plasters, applications of ice to the head, leeches, and a potion, for which a servant was to gallop to Montaignac at once. Immediately afterward all was bustle and confusion in the house. When the physician left the sick-room, Blanche followed him. "Well, doctor?" she said, with a questioning look.

The physician hesitated, but at last he replied: "People sometimes recover from such attacks."

It really mattered little to Blanche whether her father recovered or died, but she felt that an opportunity to recover her lost influence was now afforded her. If she was to fight successfully against Martial's desertion, she must improvise a very different reputation to that which she at present enjoyed. Now, if she could only appear to the world in the character of a patient victim, and devoted daughter, public opinion, which, as she had recently discovered, was after all worth having, might yet turn in her favor. Such an occasion offering itself must not be neglected. Accordingly, she lavished the most touching and delicate attentions on her suffering father. It was impossible to induce her to leave his bedside for a moment, and it was only with great difficulty that she would be persuaded to sleep for a couple of hours in an armchair in the sick-room. But while she was playing this self-imposed rôle of sister of charity with a talent worthy of a healthier mind, her chief thoughts were for Chupin. What was he doing at Montaignac? Was he watching Martial as he had promised? How slowly the time passed! Would that Thursday which had been appointed for their meeting never come?

It came at last, and momentarily entrusting her father to Aunt Medea's care, Blanche made her escape. The old poacher was waiting for her at the appointed place near the lake. "Well, what have you got to tell me?" asked Blanche.

"Next to nothing, I'm sorry to say."

"What! haven't you been watching the marquis?"

"Your husband? Excuse me, I have followed him like his own shadow. But I'm afraid the news I have of him won't interest you very much. Since the duke left for Paris, your husband has charge of everything. Ah! you wouldn't recognize him! He's always busy now. He's up at cock-crow; and goes to bed with the chickens. He writes letters all the morning. In the afternoon he receives every one who calls upon

him. The retired officers are hand and glove with him. He has reinstated five or six of them, and has granted pensions to two others. He seldom goes out, and never in the evening."

He paused, and for a moment Blanche remained silent. A question rose to her lips, and yet she scarcely dared to propound it. She blushed with shame, and it was only after a supreme effort she managed to articulate: "But he must surely have a mistress?"

Chupin burst into a noisy laugh. "Well, we have come to it at last," he said, with an air of audacious familiarity that made Blanche positively shudder. "You mean that scoundrel Lacheneur's daughter, don't you? that stuck-up minx Marie-Anne?"

Blanche felt that denial was useless. "Yes," she answered; "I do mean Marie-Anne."

"Ah, well! she's neither been seen nor heard of. She must have fled with her other lover, Maurice d'Escorval."

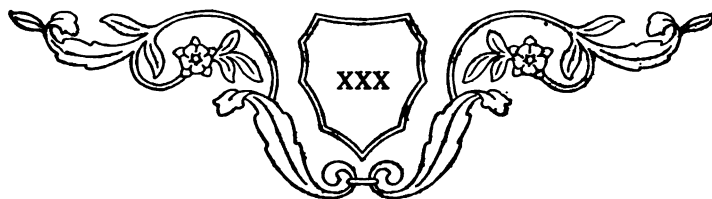
"You are mistaken."

"Oh, not at all! Of all the Lacheneurs, the only one remaining about here is Jean, the son, who leads a vagabond life, poaching much as I do. He's always in the woods, day and night, with his gun slung over his shoulder. I caught sight of him once. He's quite frightful to look at, a perfect skeleton, with eyes that glitter like live coals. If he ever meets me and sees me, my account will be settled then and there."

Blanche turned pale. Plainly enough it was Jean Lacheneur who had fired at her father. However, concealing her agitation, she replied: "I myself feel sure that Marie-Anne is in the neighborhood, concealed at Montagnac, probably. I must know. Try and find out where she is by Monday, when I will meet you here again."

"All right, I'll try," answered Chupin, and he did indeed try; exerting all his energy and cunning, but in vain. He was fettered by the precautions which he took to shield himself against Balstain and Jean Lacheneur; while, on the other hand, he had to prosecute his search personally, as no one in the neighborhood would have consented to give him the least information. "Still no news!" he said to Blanche at each succeeding interview. But she would not admit the possibility of Marie-Anne having fled with Maurice. Jealousy will not yield even to evidence. She had declared that Marie-Anne had taken her husband from her, that Martial and Marie-Anne

loved each other, and it must be so, all proofs to the contrary notwithstanding. At last, one morning, she found her spy jubilant. "Good news!" he cried, as soon as he perceived her; "we have caught the minx at last."



THIS was three days after Marie-Anne's arrival at the Borderie, which event was the general topic of conversation throughout the neighborhood, Chanlouimeau's will especially forming the subject of countless comments. The old folks looked grave, and repeated to one another: "Ah, well, here's M. Lacheneur's daughter with an income of more than two thousand francs, without counting the house." While the unattractive maidens who had not been fortunate enough to secure husbands muttered in their turn: "An honest girl would have had no such luck as that!"

When Chupin brought this great news to Blanche she trembled with anger, and clenched her soft white hands, exclaiming: "What audacity! What impudence!"

The old poacher seemed to be of the same opinion. "If each of her lovers gives her as much she will be richer than a queen," quothed he maliciously. "She will be able to buy up Sairmeuse, and Courtornieu as well if she chooses."

"And this is the woman who has estranged Martial from me!" ejaculated Blanche. "He abandons me for a filthy drab like that!" She was so incensed that she entirely forgot Chupin's presence, making no attempt to restrain herself, or to hide the secret of her sufferings. "Are you sure that what you tell me is true?" she asked.

"As sure as you stand there."

"Who told you all this?"

"No one—I have eyes. That is, I overheard two villagers talking about Mademoiselle Lacheneur's return; so then I went to the Borderie to see for myself, and I found all the shutters open. Marie-Anne was leaning out of a window. She doesn't even wear mourning, the heartless hussy!" Chupin spoke the

truth, but then the only dress the poor girl possessed was the one that Madame d'Escorval had lent her on the night of the insurrection, when it became necessary for her to doff her masculine attire.

The old poacher was about to increase Blanche's irritation by some further malicious remarks, when she checked him with the inquiry: "Whereabouts is the Borderie?"

"Oh, about a league and a half from here, opposite the water mills on the Oiselle, and not far from the river bank."

"Ah, yes! I remember now. Were you ever in the house?"

"Oh, scores and scores of times while Chanlouineau was living."

"Then you can describe it to me?"

"I should think I could. It stands in an open space a little distance from the road. There's a small garden in front and an orchard behind. They are both hedged in. In the rear of the orchard, on the right, are the vineyards; while on the left there's a small grove planted round about a spring." Chupin paused suddenly in his description, and, with a knowing wink, inquired: "But what use do you mean to make of all this information?"

"That's no matter of yours. But tell me, what is the house like inside?"

"There are three large square rooms on the ground floor, besides the kitchen and pantry. I can't say what there is upstairs, as I've never been there."

"And what are the rooms you've seen furnished like?"

"Why, like those in any peasant's house, to be sure." Chupin, it should be observed, knew nothing of the luxurious apartment which Chanlouineau had intended for Marie-Anne. Indeed, the only stranger who was aware of its existence was the leading upholsterer of Montaignac, for the young farmer had never confided his secret to any one in the neighborhood, and the furniture had been brought to the Borderie one night in the stealthiest fashion.

"How many doors are there to the house?" inquired Blanche.

"Three: one opening into the garden, one into the orchard, and another communicating with the stables. The staircase is in the middle room."

"And is Marie-Anne quite alone at the Borderie?"

"Quite alone at present; but I expect her brigand of a brother will join her before long."

After this reply, Blanche fell into so deep and prolonged a reverie that Chupin at last became impatient. He ventured to touch her on the arm, and, in a wily voice, inquired: "Well, what shall we decide?"

Blanche drew back shuddering. "My mind is not yet made up," she stammered. "I must reflect—I will see." And then noting the old poacher's discontented face, she added: "I will do nothing lightly. Don't lose sight of the marquis. If he goes to the Borderie, and he will go there, I must be informed of it. If he writes, and he will write, try to procure one of his letters. I must see you every other day. Don't rest! Try to deserve the good place I am reserving for you at Courtonnieu. Now go!"

The old rascal trudged off without attempting a rejoinder, but his manner plainly showed that he was intensely disappointed. "It serves me deucedly well right," he growled. "I oughtn't to have listened to such a silly, affected woman. She fills the air with her ravings, wants to kill everybody, burn and destroy everything. She only asks for an opportunity. Well, the occasion presents itself, and then of course her heart fails her. She draws back, and gets afraid!"

In these remarks Chupin did Blanche great injustice. If, as he had noted, she had shrunk back shuddering when he urged her to decide, it was not because her will wavered, but rather because her flesh instinctively revolted against the deed she had in her mind. The old spy's unwelcome touch, his perfidious voice and threatening glance, may also in a minor degree have prompted this movement of repulsion. At all events, Blanche's reflections were by no means calculated to appease her rancor. Whatever Chupin and the Sairmeuse villagers might say to the contrary, she regarded the story which Marie-Anne, in obedience to the Abbe Midon's instructions, had told of her travels in Piedmont as a ridiculous fable, and nothing more. In her opinion, Marie-Anne had simply emerged from some retreat where Martial had previously deemed it prudent to conceal her. But why this sudden reappearance? Vindictive Blanche was ready to swear that it was out of mere bravado, and intended only as an insult to herself. "Ah, I *will* have my revenge," she thought. "I would tear my heart out if it were capable of cowardly weakness under such provocation!"

The voice of conscience was unheard, unheeded, in this tumult of passion. Her sufferings, and Jean Lacheneur's at-

tempt upon her father's life, seemed to justify the most terrible reprisals. She had plenty of time now to brood over her wrongs, and to concoct schemes of vengeance; for her father no longer required her care. He had passed from the frenzied ravings of delirium to the stupor of idiocy. And yet the physician had confidently declared his patient to be cured. Cured! The body was cured, perhaps, but reason had utterly fled. All traces of intelligence had left the marquis's once mobile face, so ready in former times to assume the precise expression which his hypocrisy and duplicity required. His eyes, which had gleamed with cunning, wore a dull, vacant stare, and his under lip hung low, as is customary with idiots. Worst of all, no hope of any improvement was to be entertained. A single passion—indulgence at table—had taken the place of all those which in former times had swayed the life of this ambitious man. The marquis, in previous years most temperate in his habits, now ate and drank with disgusting voracity, and was rapidly becoming extremely corpulent. Between his meals he would wander about the chateau and its surroundings in a listless fashion, scarcely knowing what he did. His memory had gone, and he had lost all sense of dignity, all knowledge of good and evil. Even the instinct of self-preservation, the last which dies within us, had departed, and he had to be watched like a child. Often, as he roamed about the grounds, his daughter would gaze at him from her window with a strange terror in her heart. But after all, this warning of providence only increased her desire for revenge. "Who would not prefer death to such a misfortune?" she murmured. "Ah! Jean Lacheneur's revenge is far more terrible than if his bullet had pierced my father's heart. It is a similar revenge that I must have, and I will have it!"

She saw Chupin every two or three days; sometimes going alone to the meeting-place, and at others in Aunt Medea's company. The old poacher came punctually enough, although he was beginning to tire of his task. "I am risking a great deal," he growled. "I fancied that Jean Lacheneur would go and live at the Borderie with his sister. Then I should have been safe. But no; the brigand continues to prow! about with his gun under his arm: and sleeps in the woods at night-time. What game is he after? Why, Father Chupin, of course. On the other hand, I know that my rascally innkeeper over there has abandoned his inn and disappeared. Where is he? Hidden



behind one of these trees, perhaps, in settling what part of my body he shall plunge his knife into." What irritated the old poacher most of all was, that after two months' watching he had come to the conclusion that whatever might have been Martial's connection with Marie-Anne in former times, everything was now all over between them.

But Blanche would not admit this. "Own that they are more cunning than you are, Father Chupin, but don't tell me they don't see each other," she observed one day.

"Cunning—and how?" was the retort. "Since I have been watching the marquis, he hasn't once passed outside the fortifications of Montaignac, while, on the other hand, the postman at Sairmeuse, whom my wife cleverly questioned, declares that he hasn't taken a single letter to the Borderie."

After this, if it had not been for the hope of a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, Chupin would have abandoned his task altogether; as it was, he relaxed his surveillance considerably; coming to the rendezvous with Blanche, chiefly because he had fallen into the habit of claiming some money for his expenses, on each occasion. And when Blanche asked him for an account of everything that Martial had done since their previous meeting, he generally told her anything that came into his head. However, one day, early in September, she interrupted him as he began the same old story, and, looking him steadfastly in the eyes, exclaimed: "Either you are betraying me, Father Chupin, or else you are a fool. Yesterday Martial and Marie-Anne spent a quarter of an hour together at the Croix d'Arcy."



**A**FTER the old physician of Vigano had left the Borderie with his precious burden, Marie-Anne fell into a state of bitter despondency. Many in her situation would perhaps have experienced a feeling of relief, for had she not succeeded in concealing the outcome of her frailty, which none, save perhaps the Abbe Midon, so much as suspected? Hence, her despond-

ency may at first sight seem to have been uncalled for. But then let it be remembered that the sublime instinct of maternity had been awakened in her breast; and when she saw the physician leave her, carrying away her child, she felt as if her soul and body were being rent asunder. When might she hope to set her eyes again on this poor babe, who was doubly dear to her by reason of the very sorrow and anguish he had cost her? Ah, if it had not been for her promise to Maurice, she would have braved public opinion and kept her infant son at the Borderie. Had she not braved calumny already? She had been accused of having three lovers, Chantouineau, Martial, and Maurice. The comments of the villagers had not affected her; but she had been tortured, and was still tortured by the thought that these people didn't know the truth. Maurice was her husband, and yet she dare not proclaim the fact; she was "Mademoiselle Lacheneur" to all around—a maiden—a living lie. Surely such a situation accounted only too completely for her despondency and distress. And when she thought of her brother she positively shuddered with dismal apprehensions.

Having learned that Jean was roving about the country, she sent for him; but it was not without considerable persuasion that he consented to come and see her at the Borderie. A glance at his appearance sufficed to explain all Chupin's terror. The young fellow's clothes were in tatters, and the expression of his weather-stained, unshaven, unkempt face was ferocious in the extreme. When he entered the cottage, Marie-Anne recoiled with fear. She did not recognize him until he spoke. "It is I, sister," he said gloomily.

"What, you—my poor Jean! you!"

He surveyed himself from head to foot, and with a sneering laugh retorted: "Well, really, I shouldn't like to meet myself at dusk in the forest."

Marie-Anne fancied she could detect a threat behind this ironical remark, and her apprehensions were painful in the extreme. "What a life you must be leading, my poor brother!" she said after a brief pause. "Why didn't you come here sooner? Now I have you here, I shall not let you go. You will not desert me. I need protection and love so much. You will remain with me?"

"That's impossible, Marie-Anne."

"And why?"

Jean averted his glance; his face colored, and it was with

evident hesitation that he replied: "Because I've a right to dispose of my own life, but not of yours. We can't be anything to each other any longer. I deny you to-day, so that you may be able to deny me to-morrow. Yes, although you are now the only person on earth I love. I must and do renounce you. Your worst enemies haven't slandered you more foully than I have done, for before numerous witnesses I have openly declared that I would never set my foot inside a house given you by Chanlouineau."

"What, you said that—you, Jean—you, my brother?"

"Yes, I said it, and with a purpose; for it must be supposed that there is a deadly feud between us, so that neither you nor Maurice d'Escorval may be accused of complicity in any deed of mine."

Marie-Anne gazed at her brother wonderingly. "He is mad!" she murmured, and then with a burst of energy she added: "What do you mean to do? Tell me; I must know."

"Nothing! leave me to myself."

"Jean!"

"Leave me to myself," he repeated roughly.

Marie-Anne felt that her apprehensions were correct. "Take care, take care," she said entreatingly. "Do not tamper with such matters. God's justice will punish those who have wronged us."

But nothing could move Jean Lacheneur, or divert him from his purpose. With a hoarse, discordant laugh, he clapped his hand on his gun and retorted: "That's my justice!"

Marie-Anne almost tottered as she heard these words. She discerned in her brother's mind the same fixed, fatal idea which had lured her father on to destruction—the idea for which he had sacrificed everything—family, friends, fortune, and even his daughter's honor, the idea which had caused so much bloodshed, which had cost the lives of so many innocent men, and had finally led him to the scaffold himself. "Jean," she murmured, "remember our father."

The young fellow's face turned livid, and instinctively he clenched his fists. But the words he uttered were the more impressive, as his voice was calm and low. "It is just because I do remember my father that I am determined justice shall be done. Ah! these wretched nobles wouldn't display such audacity if all sons had my will and determination. A scoundrel like the Duc de Sairmeuse would hesitate before he at-

tacked an honest man if he were only obliged to say to himself: 'If I wrong this man, and even should I kill him, I can not escape retributive justice, for his children will surely call me to account. Their vengeance will fall on me and mine; they will pursue us by day and night, at all hours and in all seasons. We must ever fear their hatred, for they will be implacable and merciless. I shall never leave my house without fear of a bullet; never lift food to my lips without dread of poison. And until I and mine have succumbed, these avengers will prowl round about our home, threatening us at every moment with death, dishonor, ruin, infamy, and misery!'" The young fellow paused, laughed nervously, and then, in a still slower voice, he added: "That is what the Sairmeuses and the Courtornieus have to expect from me." It was impossible to mistake the import of these words. Jean Lacheneur's threats were not the wild ravings of anger. His was a cold, deep-set, premeditated desire for vengeance, which would last as long as he lived—and he took good care that his sister should understand him, for between his teeth he added: "Undoubtedly these people are very high, and I am very low, but when a tiny insect pierces the root of a giant oak, that tree is doomed."

Marie-Anne realized that all her entreaties would fail to turn her brother from his purpose, and yet she could not allow him to leave without making one more effort. It was with clasped hands and in a supplicating voice that she begged him to renounce his projects, but he still remained obdurate, and when changing her tactics she asked him to remain with her at least that evening and share her frugal supper, adding in trembling tones that it might be the last time they would see each other for long years, he again repeated: "You ask me an impossibility!" And yet he was visibly moved, and if his voice was stern, a tear trembled in his eye. She was clinging to him imploringly, when, yielding for one moment to the impulse of nature, he took her in his arms and pressed her to his heart. "Poor sister—poor Marie-Anne," he said, "you will never know what it costs me to refuse your supplications. But I can not yield to them. I have been most imprudent in coming here at all. You don't realize the danger to which you may be exposed if folks suspect that there is any connection between us. I trust that you and Maurice may lead a calm and happy life. It would be a crime for me to mix you up with my wild schemes. Think of me sometimes, but don't try to see me, or even to

find out what has become of me. A man like me struggles, triumphs, or perishes alone." He kissed Marie-Anne passionately, and freed himself from her detaining hands. "Farewell!" he cried; "when you see me again, our father will be avenged!"

Then with one bound he reached the door. She sprang out after him, meaning to call him back, but he had already disappeared. "It is all over," murmured the wretched girl; "my brother is lost. Nothing will restrain him now." And a vague, inexplicable dread invaded her heart. She felt as if she were being slowly but surely drawn into a whirlpool of passion, rancor, vengeance, and crime, and a voice whispered that she would be crushed.

Some days had elapsed after this incident, when one evening, while she was preparing her supper, she heard a rustling sound outside. She turned and looked; some one had slipped a letter under the front door. Without a moment's hesitation she raised the latch and courageously sprang out on to the threshold. No one could be seen. The gloom was well-nigh impenetrable, and when she listened not a sound broke the stillness. With a trembling hand she picked up the letter, walked toward the lamp burning on her supper table, and looked at the address. "From the Marquis de Sairmeuse!" she exclaimed in amazement as she recognized Martial's handwriting. So he had written to her! He had dared to write to her! Her first impulse was to burn the letter; and she was already holding it over the stove when she suddenly thought of her friends concealed at Father Poignot's farm. "For their sake," she thought, "I must read it, and see if they are threatened with danger."

Then hastily opening the missive, she found that it was as follows:

"MY DEAR MARIE-ANNE—Perhaps you have suspected who it is that has given an entirely new and certainly surprising turn to events. Perhaps you have also understood the motives that guided him. In that case I am amply repaid for my efforts, for you can no longer refuse me your esteem. But my work of reparation is not yet perfect. I have prepared everything for a revision of the judgment that condemned the Baron d'Es-corval to death, or for having him pardoned. You must know where the baron is concealed. Acquaint him with my plans and ascertain whether he prefers a revision of judgment or a simple pardon. If he wishes for a new trial, I will give him a

letter of license from the king. I await your reply before acting.

MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

Marie-Anne's head whirled. This was the second time that Martial had astonished her by the chivalrous spirit of his love. How noble the two men who had loved her and whom she had rejected had proved themselves to be. One of them, Chaulouineau, after dying for her sake, had sought to protect her from beyond the grave. The other, Martial de Sairmeuse, had sacrificed the connections and prejudices of his caste, and hazarded with noble recklessness the political fortunes of his house, so as to insure as far as possible her own happiness and that of those she loved. And yet the man whom she had chosen, the father of her child, Maurice d'Escorval, had not given as much as a sign of life since he left her five months before. But suddenly and without reason Marie-Anne passed from profound admiration to deep distrust. "What if Martial's offer were only a trap?" This was the suspicion that darted through her mind. "Ah!" she thought, "the Marquis de Sairmeuse would be a hero if he were sincere!" And she did not wish him to be a hero.

The result of her suspicions was that she hesitated five days before repairing to the meeting-place where Father Poignot usually awaited her. When she did go, in lieu of the worthy farmer she found the Abbe Midon, who had been greatly alarmed by her prolonged absence. It was night-time, but Marie-Anne, fortunately, knew Martial's letter by heart. The abbe made her repeat it twice, the second time very slowly, and when she had concluded he remarked: "This young man no doubt has the prejudices of his rank and his education; but his heart is noble and generous." And when Marie-Anne disclosed her suspicions: "You are wrong, my child," he added; "the marquis is certainly sincere, and it would be unwise not to take advantage of his generosity. Such, at least, is my opinion. Entrust this letter to me. I will consult the baron, and to-morrow you shall know our decision."

Four and twenty hours later the abbe and Marie-Anne met again at the same spot. "M. d'Escorval," said the priest, "agrees with me that we must trust ourselves to the Marquis de Sairmeuse. Only the baron, being innocent, can not, will not, accept a pardon. He demands a revision of the iniquitous judgment which condemned him—in one word, a new trial."

Marie-Anne had foreseen this determination, and yet she could not help exclaiming: "What! M. d'Escorval means to give himself up to his enemies! To risk his life on the chance of acquittal?" The priest nodded assent, and then knowing that it was quite useless to attempt arguing the point, Marie-Anne submissively remarked: "In this case, I must ask you for a rough draft of the letter I ought to write to the marquis."

For a moment the priest did not reply. He evidently had some misgivings. At last, summoning all his courage, he answered: "It would be better not to write."

"But—"

"It is not that I distrust the marquis, not by any means, but a letter is dangerous; it doesn't always reach the person it's addressed to. You must see M. de Sairmeuse."

Marie-Anne recoiled. "Never! never!" she exclaimed.

The abbe did not seem surprised. "I understand your repugnance, my child," he said gently; "your reputation has suffered greatly through the marquis's attentions. But duty calls, and this is not the time to hesitate. You know that the baron is innocent, and you know, alas, that your father's mad enterprise has ruined him. You must, at least, make this atoning sacrifice." He then explained to her everything she would have to say, and did not leave her until she had promised to see the marquis in person.

It must not be supposed that Marie-Anne's aversion to this interview was due to the reason which the abbe assigned. Her reputation! Alas, she knew that it was lost forever. A fortnight before the prospect of such a meeting would have in no wise disquieted her. Then, though she no longer hated Martial, she thought of him with indifference, whereas now—Perhaps, in choosing the Croix d'Arcy for the rendezvous, she hoped that this spot with its cruel memories would restore aversion to her heart. As she walked along toward the meeting-place, she said to herself that no doubt Martial would wound her feelings by his usual tone of careless gallantry. But in this she was mistaken. The young marquis was greatly agitated, but he did not utter a word unconnected with the purport of the meeting. It was only when the conference was over, and he had consented to all the conditions suggested by the abbe, that he sadly remarked: "We are friends, are we not?"

And in an almost inaudible voice she answered, "Yes."

And that was all. He remounted his horse, which had been

held by a servant, and galloped off in the direction of Montaignac. Breathless, with cheeks on fire, Marie-Anne watched him as, bending low in the saddle, he urged his horse onward over the dusty highway, until at last a bend and some projecting trees finally hid him from view. Then, all of a sudden, she became as it were conscious of her thoughts. "Ah, wretched woman that I am," she exclaimed, "is it possible I could ever love any other man than Maurice, my husband, the father of my child?"

Her voice was still trembling with emotion when she related the particulars of the interview to the abbe. But he did not perceive her trouble, his thoughts being busy with the baron's interests. "I felt sure," said he, "that Martial would agree to our conditions. I was, indeed, so certain that I even made every arrangement for the baron to leave the farm. He will leave it to-morrow night and wait at your house till we receive the letters of license from the king. The heat and bad ventilation of Poignot's loft are certainly retarding his recovery. One of Poignot's boys will bring our baggage to-morrow evening, and at eleven o'clock or so we will place M. d'Escorval in a vehicle and all sup together at the Borderie."

"Heaven comes to my aid!" murmured Marie-Anne as she walked home, reflecting that now she would no longer be alone. With Madame d'Escorval at her side to talk to her of Maurice, and the cheerful presence of her other friends, she would soon be able to chase away those thoughts of Martial now haunting her.

When she awoke the next morning she was in better spirits than she had been for months, and once, while putting her little house in order, she was surprised to find herself singing at her work. Just as eight o'clock in the evening was striking she heard a peculiar whistle. This was a signal from the younger Poignot, who soon appeared laden with an armchair for the sick man, the abbe's medicine chest, and a bag of books. They were all placed in the room upstairs—the room which Chanlouineau had decorated at such cost, and which Marie-Anne now intended for the baron. Young Poignot told her that he had several other things to bring, and nearly an hour afterward, fancying that he might be overloaded, she ventured out to meet him. The night was very dark, and as she hastened on, Marie-Anne failed to notice two figures stooping behind a clump of lilac bushes in her little garden.





CHUPIN was at first quite crestfallen when Blanche told him of Martial's meeting with Marie-Anne at the Croix d'Arcy. He was detected with a falsehood on his lips, and feared that the discovery of his duplicity would forever wreck his prospects. He must say good-by to a safe and pleasant retreat at Courtornieu, and good-by also to frequent gifts which had enabled him to spare his hoarded treasure, and even to increase it. However, his discomfiture only lasted for a moment. It seemed best to put a bold face on the matter, and accordingly raising his head, he remarked with an affectation of frankness: "I may be stupid no doubt, but I wouldn't deceive a child. I scarcely fancy your information can be correct. Some one must have told you falsely."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "I obtained my information from two persons, who were ignorant of the interest it possessed for me."

"As truly as the sun is in the heavens, I swear—"

"Don't swear; simply confess that you have been very negligent."

Blanche spoke so authoritatively that Chupin considered it best to change his tactics. With an air of abject humility, he admitted that he had relaxed his surveillance on the previous day; he had been very busy in the morning; then one of his boys had injured his foot; and, finally, he had met some friends who persuaded him to go with them to a wine-shop, where he had taken more than usual, so that— He told his story in a whining tone, frequently interrupting himself to affirm his repentance and cover himself with reproaches. "Old drunkard!" he said, "this will teach you not to neglect your duties."

But far from reassuring Blanche, his protestations only made her more suspicious. "All this is very good, Father Chupin," she said dryly, "but what are you going to do now to repair your negligence?"

"What do I intend to do?" he exclaimed, feigning the most

violent anger. "Oh! you shall see. I will prove that no one can deceive me with impunity. There is a small grove near the Borderie, and I shall station myself there; and may the devil seize me if a cat enters that house without my knowing it."

Blanche drew her purse from her pocket, and handed three louis to Chupin, saying as she did so, "Take these, and be more careful in future. Another blunder of the kind, and I shall have to obtain some other person's assistance."

The old poacher went away whistling contentedly. He felt quite reassured. In this, however, he was wrong, for Blanche's generosity was only intended to prevent him fancying that she doubted his veracity. In point of fact, she did doubt it. She believed his promises to be on a par with his past conduct, which, as events had shown, had at the very best been negligent in the extreme. This miserable wretch made it his business to betray others—so why shouldn't he have betrayed her as well? What confidence could she place in his reports? She certainly paid him, but the person who paid him more would unquestionably have the preference. Still, she must know the truth, the whole truth, and how was she to ascertain it? There was but one method—a certain, though a very disagreeable one—she must play the spy herself.

With this idea in her head, she waited impatiently for evening to arrive, and then, directly dinner was over, she summoned Aunt Medea, and requested her company, as she was going out for a walk. The impoverished chaperone made a feeble protest concerning the lateness of the hour. But Blanche speedily silenced her, and bade her get ready at once, adding that she did not wish any one in the chateau to know that they had gone out. Aunt Medea had no other resource than to obey, and in the twinkling of an eye she was ready. The marquis had just been put to bed, the servants were at dinner, and Blanche and her companion reached a little gate leading from the grounds into the open fields without being observed. "Good heavens! Where are we going?" groaned the astonished chaperone.

"What does that matter to you? Come along!" replied Blanche, who, as it may have been guessed, was going to the Borderie. She could have followed the banks of the Oiselle, but she preferred to cut across the fields, thinking she would be less likely to meet any one. The night was very dark, and the hedges and ditches often impeded their progress. On two

occasions Blanche lost her way, while Aunt Medea stumbled again and again over the rough ground, bruising herself against the stones. She groaned; she almost wept; but her terrible niece was pitiless. "Come along!" she cried, "or else I shall leave you to find your way as best you can." And so the poor dependent struggled on.

At last, after more than an hour's tramp, Blanche ventured to breathe. She recognized Chanlouineau's house, a short distance off, and soon afterward she paused in the little grove of which Chupin had spoken. Aunt Medea now timidly inquired if they were at their journey's end—a question which Blanche answered affirmatively. "But be quiet," she added, "and remain where you are. I wish to look about a little."

"What! you are leaving me alone?" ejaculated the frightened chaperon. "Blanche, I entreat you! What are you going to do? Good heavens! you frighten me. You do indeed, Blanche!"

But her niece had gone. She was exploring the grove, looking for Chupin, whom she did not find. This convinced her that the old poacher was deceiving her, and she angrily asked herself if Martial and Marie-Anne were not in the house hard by at that very hour, laughing at her credulity. She then rejoined Aunt Medea, whom she found half-dead with fright, and they both advanced to the edge of the copse, where they could view the front of the house. A flickering, ruddy light illuminated two windows on the upper floor. There was evidently a fire in the room upstairs. "That's right," murmured Blanche bitterly, "Martial is such a chilly personage." She was about to approach the house when a peculiar whistle made her pause. She looked about her, and, through the darkness, she managed to distinguish a man walking toward the Borderie, and carrying a weighty burden. Almost immediately afterward a woman, certainly Marie-Anne, opened the door of the house, and the stranger was admitted. Ten minutes later he reappeared, this time without his burden, and walked briskly away. Blanche was wondering what all this meant, but for the time being she did not venture to approach, and nearly an hour elapsed before she decided to try to satisfy her curiosity by peering through the windows. Accompanied by Aunt Medea, she had just reached the little garden when the door of the cottage opened so suddenly that Blanche and her relative had scarcely time to conceal themselves behind a clump

of lilac bushes. At the same moment Marie-Anne crossed the threshold and walked down the narrow garden path, gained the road, and disappeared. "Wait for me here," said Blanche to her aunt in a strained, unnatural voice, "and whatever happens, whatever you hear, if you wish to finish your days at Courtoirieu, not a word! Don't stir from this spot; I will come back again." Then pressing the frightened spinster's arm, she left her alone and went into the cottage.

Marie-Anne, on going out, had left a candle burning on the table in the front room. Blanche seized it and boldly began an exploration of the dwelling. Owing to Chupin's description, she was tolerably familiar with the arrangements on the ground floor, and yet the aspect of the rooms surprised her. They were roughly floored with tiles, and the walls were poorly whitewashed. A massive linen-press, a couple of heavy tables, and a few clumsy chairs, constituted the only furniture in the front apartment, while from the beams above hung numerous bags of grain and bunches of dried herbs. Marie-Anne evidently slept in the back room, which contained an old-fashioned country bedstead, very high and broad, the tall, fluted posts of which were draped with green serge curtains, sliding on iron rings. Fastened to the wall at the head of the bed was a receptacle for holy water. Blanche dipped her finger in the bowl, and found it full to the brim. Then beside the window on a wooden shelf she espied a jug and basin of common earthenware. "It must be confessed that my husband doesn't provide his idol with a very sumptuous abode," she muttered with a sneer. And for a moment, indeed, she was almost on the point of asking herself if jealousy had not led her astray. Remembering Martial's fastidious tastes, she failed to reconcile them with these meagre surroundings. The presence of the holy water, moreover, seemed incompatible with her suspicions. But the latter revived again when she entered the kitchen. A savory soup was bubbling in a pot over the fire, and fragrant stews were simmering in two or three saucepans. Such preparations could not be made for Marie-Anne alone. Whom, then, were they for? At this moment Blanche remembered the ruddy glow which she had noticed through the windows on the floor above. Hastily leaving the kitchen, she climbed the stairs and opened a door she found in front of her. A cry of mingled anger and surprise escaped her lips. She stood on the threshold of the room which Chan-

louineau in the boldness of his passion had designed to be the sanctuary of his love. Here everything was beautiful and luxurious: "Ah, so after all it's true," exclaimed Blanche in a paroxysm of jealousy. "And I was fancying that everything was too meagre and too poor. Downstairs everything is so arranged that visitors may not suspect the truth! Ah, now I recognize Martial's astonishing talent for dissimulation; he is so infatuated with this creature that he is even anxious to shield her reputation. He keeps his visits secret and hides himself up here. Yes, here it is that they laugh at me, the deluded, forsaken wife whose marriage was but a mockery!"

She had wished to know the truth, and now she felt she knew it. Certainty was less cruel than everlasting suspicion, and she even took a bitter delight in examining the appointments of the apartment, which to her mind proved how deeply Martial must be infatuated. She felt the heavy curtains of brocaded silken stuff with trembling hands; she tested the thickness of the rich carpet with her feet; the embroidered coverlid on the palisandre bedstead, the mirrors, the hundred knickknacks on the tables and the mantelshelf—all in turn met with her attentive scrutiny. Everything indicated that some one was expected—the bright fire—the cozy armchair beside it, the slippers on the rug. And whom would Marie-Anne expect but Martial? No doubt the man whom Blanche had seen arriving had come to announce the marquis's approach, and Marie-Anne had gone to meet him.

Curiously enough, on the hearth stood a bowl of soup, still warm, and which Marie-Anne had evidently been about to drink when she heard the messenger's signal. Blanche was still wondering how she could profit of her discoveries, when she espied a chest of polished oak standing open on a table near a glass door leading into an adjoining dressing-room. She walked toward it and perceived that it contained a number of tiny vials and boxes. It was indeed the Abbe Midon's medicine chest, which Marie-Anne had placed here in readiness, should it be needed when the baron arrived, weak from his nocturnal journey. Blanche was examining the contents when suddenly she noticed two bottles of blue glass, on which "poison" was inscribed. "Poison!"—the word seemed to fascinate her, and by a diabolical inspiration she associated these vials with the bowl of soup standing on the hearth. "And why not?" she muttered. "I could escape afterward." Another thought made

her pause, however. Martial would no doubt return with Marie-Anne, and perhaps he would drink this broth. She hesitated for a moment, and then took one of the vials in her hand, murmuring as she did so: "God will decide; it is better he should die than belong to another." She had hitherto acted like one bewildered, but this act, simple in its performance, but terrible in its import, seemed to restore all her presence of mind. "What poison is it?" thought she; "ought I to administer a large or a small dose?" With some little difficulty she opened the bottle and poured a small portion of its contents into the palm of her hand. The poison was a fine, white powder, glistening like pulverized glass. "Can it really be sugar?" thought Blanche; and with the view of making sure she moistened a finger-tip, and gathered on it a few atoms of the powder, which she applied to her tongue. Its taste was not unlike that of an apple. She wiped her tongue with her handkerchief, and then without hesitation or remorse, without even turning pale, she poured the entire contents of the bottle into the bowl. Her self-possession was so perfect that she even stirred the broth, so that the powder might more rapidly dissolve. She next tasted it, and found that it had a slightly bitter flavor—not sufficiently perceptible, however, to awaken distrust. All that now remained was to escape, and she was already walking toward the door when, to her horror, she heard some one coming up the stairs. What should she do? Where could she conceal herself? She now felt so sure that she would be detected that she almost decided to throw the contents of the bowl into the fire, and then face the intruders. But no—a chance remained—the dressing-room? She darted into it, without daring, however, to close the door, for the least click of the lock might betray her.

Immediately afterward Marie-Anne entered the apartment, followed by a peasant carrying a large bundle. "Ah! here is my candle!" she exclaimed, as she crossed the threshold. "Joy must be making me lose my wits! I could have sworn that I left it on the table downstairs."

Blanche shuddered. She had not thought of this circumstance before.

"Where shall I put these clothes?" asked the peasant.

"Lay them down here. I will arrange them by and by," replied Marie-Anne.

The youth dropped his heavy burden with a sigh of relief.

"That's the last," he exclaimed. "Now our gentleman can come."

"At what o'clock will he start?" inquired Marie-Anne.

"At eleven. It will be nearly midnight when he gets here."

Marie-Anne glanced at the magnificent timepiece on the mantelshelf. "I have still three hours before me," said she; "more time than I need. Supper is ready, I am going to set the table here by the fire. Tell him to bring a good appetite with him."

"I won't forget, mademoiselle; thank you for having come to meet me. The load wasn't so very heavy, but it was awkward to handle."

"Won't you take a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks. I must make haste back, Mademoiselle Lache-neur."

"Good night, Poignot."

Blanche had never heard this name of Poignot before; it had no meaning for her. Ah, if she had heard M. d'Escorval or the abbe mentioned, she might perhaps have doubted the truth; her resolution might have wavered and—who knows? But unfortunately, young Poignot, in referring to the baron, had spoken of him as "our gentleman," while Marie-Anne said, "he." And to Blanche's mind they both of them referred to Martial. Yes, unquestionably it must be the Marquis de Sairmeuse, who would arrive at midnight. She was sure of it. It was he who had sent this messenger with a parcel of clothes—a proceeding which could only mean that he was going to establish himself at the Borderie. Perhaps he would cast aside all secrecy and live there openly, regardless of his rank, his dignity, and duties; forgetful even of his prejudices as well. These conjectures could only fire Blanche's jealous fury. Why should she hesitate or tremble after that? The only thing she had to fear now was that Marie-Anne might enter the dressing-room and find her there. She had but little anxiety concerning Aunt Medea, who, it is true, was still in the garden; but after the orders she had received the poor dependent would remain as still as a stone behind the lilac bushes, and, if needs be, during the whole night. On the other hand, Marie-Anne would remain alone in the house during another two hours and a half, and Blanche reflected that this would give her ample time to watch the effects of the poison on her hated rival. When the crime was discovered she would be far away. No one knew she was not at Courtornieu; no one had seen her leave the chateau;

Aunt Medea would be as silent as the grave. And, besides, who would dare to accuse the Marquise de Sairmeuse, *nee* Blanche de Courtornieu, of murder? One thing that worried Blanche was that Marie-Anne seemed to pay no attention to the broth. She had, in fact, forgotten it. She had opened the bundle of clothes, and was now busily arranging them in a wardrobe near the bed. Who talks of presentiments! She was as gay and vivacious as in her happiest days; and while she folded the clothes hummed an air that Maurice had often sung. She felt that her troubles were nearly over, for her friends would soon be round her, and a brighter time seemed near at hand. When she had put all the clothes away, she shut the wardrobe and drew a small table up before the fire. It was not till then that she noticed the bowl standing on the hearth. "How stupid I am!" she said, with a laugh; and taking the bowl in her hands, she raised it to her lips.

Blanche heard Marie-Anne's exclamation plainly enough; she saw what she was doing; and yet she never felt the slightest remorse. However, Marie-Anne drank but one mouthful, and then, in evident disgust, she set the bowl down. A horrible dread made the watcher's heart stand still, and she wondered whether her victim had detected any peculiar taste in the soup. No, she had not; but, owing to the fire having fallen low, it had grown nearly cold, and a slight coating of grease floated on its surface. Taking a spoon, Marie-Anne skimmed the broth carefully, and stirred it up. Then, being thirsty, she drank the liquid almost at one draft, laid the bowl on the mantelpiece, and resumed her work.

The crime was perpetrated. The future no longer depended on Blanche de Courtornieu's will. Come what would, she was a murderess. But though she was conscious of her crime, the excess of her jealous hatred prevented her from realizing its enormity. She said to herself that she had only accomplished an act of justice, that in reality her vengeance was scarcely cruel enough for the wrongs she had suffered, and that nothing could indeed fully atone for the tortures inflicted on her. But in a few moments grievous misgivings took possession of her mind. Her knowledge of the effects of poison was extremely limited. She had expected to see Marie-Anne fall dead before her, as if stricken down by a thunderbolt. But no, several minutes passed, and Marie-Anne continued her preparations for supper as if nothing had occurred. She spread a white cloth



over the table, smoothed it with her hands, and placed a cruet-stand and salt-cellar on it. Blanche's heart was beating so violently that she could scarcely realize why its throbbings were not heard in the adjoining room. Her assurance had been great, but now the fear of punishment which usually precedes remorse crept over her mind; and the idea that her victim might enter the dressing-room made her turn pale with fear. At last she saw Marie-Anne take the light and go downstairs. Blanche was left alone, and the thought of escaping again occurred to her; but how could she possibly leave the house without being seen? Must she wait there, hidden in that nook, forever? "That couldn't have been poison. It doesn't act," she muttered in a rage.

Alas! it did act, as she herself perceived when Marie-Anne reentered the room. The latter had changed frightfully during the brief interval she had spent on the ground floor. Her face was livid and mottled with purple spots, her distended eyes glittered with a strange brilliancy, and she let a pile of plates she carried fall on the table with a crash.

"The poison! it begins to act at last!" thought Blanche.

Marie-Anne stood on the hearthrug, gazing wildly round her, as if seeking for the cause of her incomprehensible sufferings. She passed and repassed her hand across her forehead, which was bathed in cold sweat; she gasped for breath, and then suddenly overcome with nausea, she staggered, pressed her hands convulsively to her breast, and sank into the armchair, crying: "Oh, God! how I suffer!"

Kneeling by the door of the dressing-room which was only partly closed, Blanche eagerly watched the workings of the poison she had administered. She was so near her victim that she could distinguish the throbbing of her temples, and sometimes she fancied she could feel on her own cheek her rival's breath, scorching her like flame. An utter prostration followed Marie-Anne's paroxysm of agony; and if it had not been for the convulsive working of her mouth and labored breathing, it might have been supposed that she was dead. But soon the nausea returned, and she was seized with vomiting. Each effort seemed to contract her body; and gradually a ghastly tint crept over her face, the spots on her cheeks became of a deeper tint, her eyes seemed as if they were about to burst from their sockets, and great drops of perspiration rolled down her cheeks. Her sufferings must have been intolerable. She moaned feebly

at times, and at intervals gave vent to truly heartrending shrieks. Then she faltered fragmentary sentences; she begged piteously for water, or entreated Heaven to shorten her tortures. "Ah, it is horrible! I suffer too much! My God! grant me death!" She invoked all the friends she had ever known, calling for aid in a despairing voice. She called on Madame d'Escorval, the abbe, Maurice, her brother, Chaulouineau, and Martial!

Martial!—that name more than sufficed to chase all pity from Blanche's heart. "Go on! call your lover, call!" she said to herself, bitterly. "He will come too late." And as Marie-Anne repeated the name, in a tone of agonized entreaty: "Suffer!" continued Blanche, "suffer, you deserve it! You imparted to Martial the courage to forsake me, his wife, as a drunken lackey would abandon the lowest of degraded creatures! Die, and my husband will return to me repentant." No, she had no pity. She felt a difficulty in breathing, but that merely resulted from the instinctive horror which the sufferings of others inspire—a purely physical impression, which is adorned with the fine name of sensibility, but which is, in reality, the grossest selfishness.

And yet, Marie-Anne was sinking perceptibly. She had fallen on to the floor, during one of her attacks of sickness, and now she even seemed unable to moan; her eyes closed, and after a spasm which brought a bloody foam to her lips, her head sank back, and she lay motionless on the hearthrug.

"It is over," murmured Blanche, rising to her feet. To her surprise her own limbs trembled so acutely that she could scarcely stand. Her will was still firm and implacable; but her flesh failed her. She had never even imagined a scene like that she had just witnessed. She knew that poison caused death; but she had not suspected the agony of such a death. She no longer thought of increasing her victim's sufferings by upbraiding her. Her only desire now was to leave the house, the very floor of which seemed to scorch her feet. A strange, inexplicable sensation was creeping over her; it was not yet fright, but rather the stupor that follows the perpetration of a terrible crime. Still, she compelled herself to wait a few moments longer; then seeing that Marie-Anne still remained motionless, with closed eyes, she ventured to open the door softly, and enter the room in which her victim was lying. But she had not taken three steps forward before Marie-Anne, as if she had

been galvanized by an electric battery, suddenly rose and extended her arms to bar her enemy's passage. This movement was so unexpected and so appalling that Blanche recoiled. "The Marquise de Sairmeuse," faltered Marie-Anne. "You, Blanche—here!" And finding an explanation of her sufferings in the presence of this young woman, who once had been her friend, but who was now her bitterest enemy, she exclaimed: "It is you who have murdered me!"

Blanche de Courtornieu's nature was one of those that break but never bend. Since she had been detected, nothing in the world would induce her to deny her guilt. She advanced boldly, and in a firm voice replied: "Yes, I have taken my revenge. Do you think I didn't suffer that evening when you sent your brother to take my newly-wedded husband away, so that I have never since gazed upon his face?"

"Your husband! I sent my brother to take him away! I do not understand you."

"Do you dare deny, then, that you are not Martial's mistress?"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse's mistress! Why, I saw him yesterday for the first time since the Baron d'Escorval's escape." The effort which Marie-Anne had made to rise and speak had exhausted her strength. She fell back in the armchair.

But Blanche was pitiless. "You only saw Martial then," she said. "Pray, tell me, who gave you this costly furniture, these silk hangings, all the luxury that surrounds you?"

"Chanlouineau."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "So be it," she said, with an ironical smile. "But you are not waiting for Chanlouineau this evening? Have you warmed these slippers and laid this table for Chanlouineau? Was it Chanlouineau who sent his clothes by a peasant named Poignot? You see that I know everything?" She paused for some reply; but her victim was silent. "Whom are you waiting for?" insisted Blanche. "Answer me!"

"I can not!"

"Ah, of course not, because you know that it is your lover who is coming, you wretched woman—my husband, Martial!"

Marie-Anne was considering the situation as well as her intolerable sufferings and troubled mind would permit. Could she name the persons she was expecting? Would not any

mention of the Baron d'Escorval to Blanche ruin and betray him? They were hoping for a letter of license for a revision of judgment, but he was none the less under sentence of death, and liable to be executed in twenty-four hours.

"So you refuse to tell me whom you expect here—at midnight," repeated the marquise.

"I refuse," gasped Marie-Anne; but at the same time she was seized with a sudden impulse. Although the slightest movement caused her intolerable agony, she tore her dress open, and drew a folded paper from her bosom. "I am not the Marquis de Sairmeuse's mistress," she said, in an almost inaudible voice. "I am Maurice d'Escorval's wife. Here is the proof—read."

Blanche had scarcely glanced at the paper than she turned as pale as her victim. Her sight failed her; there was a strange ringing in her ears, and a cold sweat started from every pore in her skin. This paper was the marriage certificate of Maurice d'Escorval and Marie-Anne Lacheneur, drawn up by the cure of Vigano, witnessed by the old physician and Bavois, and sealed with the parish seal. The proof was indisputable. She had committed a useless crime; she had murdered an innocent woman. The first good impulse of her life made her heart beat more quickly. She did not stop to consider; she forgot the danger to which she exposed herself, and in a ringing voice she cried: "Help! help!"

Eleven o'clock was just striking in the country; every one was naturally abed, and, moreover, the nearest farmhouse was half a league away. Blanche's shout was apparently lost in the stillness of the night. In the garden below Aunt Medea perhaps heard it; but she would have allowed herself to be cut to pieces rather than stir from her place. And yet there was one other who heard that cry of distress. Had Blanche and her victim been less overwhelmed with despair, they would have heard a noise on the stairs, which at that very moment were creaking under the tread of a man, who was cautiously climbing them. But he was not a savior, for he did not answer the appeal. However, even if there had been help at hand, it would now have come too late.

Marie-Anne felt that there was no longer any hope for her, and that it was the chill of death which was creeping toward her heart. She felt that her life was fast ebbing away. So, when Blanche turned as if to rush out in search of assistance,

she detained her with a gesture, and gently called her by her name. The murderess paused. "Do not summon any one," murmured Marie-Anne; "it would do no good. Let me at least die in peace. It will not be long now."

"Hush! do not speak so. You must not—you shall not die! If you should die—great God! what would my life be afterward!"

Marie-Anne made no reply. The poison was rapidly completing its work. The sufferer's breath literally whistled as it forced its way through her inflamed throat. When she moved her tongue, it scorched her palate as if it had been a piece of hot iron; her lips were parched and swollen; and her hands, inert and paralyzed, would no longer obey her will.

But the horror of the situation restored Blanche's calmness. "All is not yet lost," she exclaimed. "It was in that great box there on the table that I found the white powder I poured into the bowl. You must know what it is; you must know the antidote."

Marie-Anne sadly shook her head. "Nothing can save me now," she murmured, in an almost inaudible voice; "but I don't complain. Who knows the misery from which death may preserve me? I don't crave life; I have suffered so much during the past year; I have endured such humiliation; I have wept so much! A curse was on me!" She was suddenly endowed with that clearness of mental vision so often granted to the dying. She saw how she had wrought her own undoing by consenting to play the perfidious part her father had assigned her, and how she herself had paved the way for the slander, crimes, and misfortunes of which she had been the victim.

Her voice grew fainter and fainter. Worn out with suffering, a sensation of drowsiness stole over her. She was falling asleep in the arms of death. But suddenly such a terrible thought found its way into her failing mind that she gasped with agony: "My child!" And then, regaining, by a superhuman effort, as much will, energy, and strength as the poison would allow her, she straightened herself in the armchair, and though her features were contracted by mortal anguish, yet with an energy of which no one would have supposed her capable, she exclaimed: "Blanche, listen to me. It is the secret of my life which I am going to reveal to you; no one suspects it. I have a son by Maurice. Alas! many months have elapsed since my husband disappeared. If he is dead, what will become

of my child? Blanche, you, who have killed me, swear to me that you will be a mother to my child!"

Blanche was utterly overcome. "I swear!" she sobbed; "I swear!"

"On that condition, but on that condition alone, I pardon you. But take care! Do not forget your oath! Blanche, Heaven sometimes allows the dead to avenge themselves. You have sworn, remember. My spirit will allow you no rest if you do not fulfil your vow!"

"I will remember," sobbed Blanche; "I will remember. But the child—"

"Ah! I was afraid—cowardly creature that I was! I dreaded the shame—then Maurice insisted—I sent my child away—your jealousy and my death are the punishment of my weakness. Poor child! abandoned to strangers! Wretched woman that I am! Ah! this suffering is too horrible. Blanche, remember—"

She spoke again, but her words were indistinct, inaudible. Blanche frantically seized the dying woman's arm, and endeavored to arouse her. "To whom have you confided your child?" she repeated; "to whom? Marie-Anne—a word more—a single word—a name, Marie-Anne!"

The unfortunate woman's lips moved, but the death-rattle already sounded in her throat; a terrible convulsion shook her frame; she slid down from the chair, and fell full length upon the floor. Marie-Anne was dead—dead, and she had not disclosed the name of the old physician at Vigano to whom she had entrusted her child. She was dead, and the terrified murderess stood in the middle of the room as rigid and motionless as a statue. It seemed to her that madness—a madness like that which had stricken her father—was working in her brain. She forgot everything; she forgot that some one was expected at midnight; that time was flying, and that she would surely be discovered if she did not fly. But the man who had entered the house when she cried for help was watching over her. As soon as he saw that Marie-Anne had breathed her last, he pushed against the door, and thrust his leering face into the room.

"Chupin!" faltered Blanche.

"In the flesh," he responded. "This was a grand chance for you. Ah, ha! The business riled your stomach a little; but nonsense! that will soon pass off. But we must not dawdle here: some one may come in. Let us make haste."

Mechanically the murderess stepped forward, but Marie-

Anne's dead body lay between her and the door, barring the passage. To leave the room it was necessary to step over her victim's lifeless form. She had not courage to do so, and recoiled with a shudder. But Chupin was troubled by no such scruples. He sprang across the body, lifted Blanche as if she had been a child, and carried her out of the house. He was intoxicated with joy. He need have no fears for the future now; for Blanche was bound to him by the strongest of chains—complicity in crime. He saw himself on the threshold of a life of constant revelry. All remorse anent Lacheneur's betrayal had departed. He would be sumptuously fed, lodged, and clothed; and, above all, effectually protected by an army of servants.

While these agreeable thoughts were darting through his mind, the cool night air was reviving the terror-stricken Marquise de Sairmeuse. She intimated that she should prefer to walk, and accordingly Chupin deposited her on her feet some twenty paces from the house. Aunt Medea was already with them after the fashion of a dog left at the door by its master while the latter goes into the house. She had instinctively followed her niece, when she perceived the old poacher carrying her out of the cottage.

"We must not stop to talk," said Chupin. "Come, I will lead the way." And taking Blanche by the arm, he hastened toward the grove. "Ah! so Marie-Anne had a child," he remarked, as they hurried. "She pretended to be such a saint! But where the deuce has she placed it?"

"I shall find it," replied Blanche.

"Hum! that is easier said than done," quoth the old poacher, thoughtfully.

Scarcely had he spoken than a shrill laugh resounded in the darkness. In the twinkling of an eye Chupin had released his hold on Blanche's arm, and assumed an attitude of defense. The precaution was fruitless; for at the same moment a man concealed among the trees bounded upon him from behind, and, plunging a knife four times into his writhing body, exclaimed: "Holy Virgin! now is my vow fulfilled! I shall no longer have to eat with my fingers!"

"Balstain! the innkeeper!" groaned the wounded man, sinking to the ground.

Blanche seemed rooted to the spot with horror; but Aunt Medea for once in her life had some energy in her fear.

"Come!" she shrieked, dragging her niece away. "Come—he is dead!"

Not quite, for the old traitor had sufficient strength remaining to crawl home and knock at the door. His wife and youngest boy were sleeping soundly, and it was his eldest son, who had just returned home, who opened the door. Seeing his father prostrate on the ground, the young man thought he was intoxicated, and tried to lift him and carry him into the house, but the old poacher begged him to desist. "Don't touch me," said he. "It is all over with me! but listen: Lacheneur's daughter has just been poisoned by Madame Blanche. It was to tell you this that I dragged myself here. This knowledge is worth a fortune, my boy, if you are not a fool!" And then he died without being able to tell his family where he had concealed the price of Lacheneur's blood.



**I**T will be recollected that of all those who witnessed the Baron d'Escorval's terrible fall over the precipice below the citadel of Montaignac, the Abbe Midon was the only one who did not despair. He set about his task with more than courage, with a reverent faith in the protection of Providence, remembering Ambroise Pare's sublime phrase: "I dress the wound—God heals it." That he was right to hope was conclusively shown by the fact that after six months' sojourn in Father Poignot's house, the baron was able to sit up and even to limp about with the aid of crutches. On reaching this stage of recovery, however, when it was essential he should take some little exercise, he was seriously inconvenienced by the diminutive proportions of Poignot's loft, so that he welcomed with intense delight the prospect of taking up his abode at the Borderie with Marie-Anne; and when indeed the abbe fixed the day for moving, he grew as impatient for it to arrive as a school-boy is for the holidays. "I am suffocating here," he said to his wife, "literally suffocating. The time passes slowly. When will the happy day come?"



It came at last. The morning was spent in packing up such things as they had managed to procure during their stay at the farm; and soon after nightfall Poignot's elder son began carrying them away. "Everything is at the Borderie," said the honest fellow, on returning from his last trip, "and Mademoiselle Lacheneur bids the baron bring a good appetite."

"I shall have one, never fear!" responded M. d'Escorval gaily. "We shall all have one."

Father Poignot himself was busy harnessing his best horse to the cart which was to convey the baron to his new home. The worthy man felt sad as he thought that these guests, for whose sake he had incurred such danger, were now going to leave him. He felt he should acutely miss them, that the house would seem gloomy and deserted after they had left. He would allow no one else to arrange the mattress intended for M. d'Escorval comfortably in the cart; and when he had done this to his satisfaction, he murmured, with a sigh: "It's time to start!" and turned to climb the narrow staircase leading to the loft.

M. d'Escorval with a patient's natural egotism had not thought of the parting. But when he saw the honest farmer coming to bid him good-by, with signs of deep emotion on his face, he forgot all the comforts that awaited him at the Borderie, in the remembrance of the royal and courageous hospitality he had received in the house he was about to leave. The tears sprang to his eyes. "You have rendered me a service which nothing can repay, Father Poignot," he said, with intense feeling. "You have saved my life."

"Oh! we won't talk of that, baron. In my place, you would have done the same—neither more nor less."

"I shall not attempt to express my thanks, but I hope to live long enough to show my gratitude."

The staircase was so narrow that they had considerable difficulty in carrying the baron down; but finally they had him stretched comfortably on his mattress in the cart; a few handfuls of straw being scattered over his limbs so as to hide him from the gaze of any inquisitive passers-by. The latter was scarcely to be expected, it is true, for it was now fully eleven o'clock at night. Parting greetings were exchanged, and then the cart which young Poignot drove with the utmost caution started slowly on its way.

On foot, some twenty paces in the rear, came Madame

d'Escorval, leaning on the abbe's arm. It was very dark, but even if they had been in the full sunshine, the former cure of Sairmeuse might have encountered any of his old parishioners without the least danger of detection. He had allowed his hair and beard to grow; his tonsure had entirely disappeared, and his sedentary life had caused him to become much stouter. He was clad like all the well-to-do peasants of the neighborhood, his face being partially hidden by a large slouch-hat. He had not felt so much at ease for months past. Obstacles which had originally seemed to him insurmountable had now vanished, and in the near future he saw the baron's innocence proclaimed by an impartial tribunal, while he himself was reinstated in the parsonage of Sairmeuse. If it had not been for his recollection of Maurice he would have had nothing to trouble his mind. Why had young D'Escorval given no sign of life? It seemed impossible for him to have met with any misfortune without hearing of it, for there was brave old Corporal Bavois, who would have risked anything to come and warn them if Maurice had been in danger. The abbe was so absorbed in these reflections that he did not notice Madame d'Escorval was leaning more heavily on his arm and gradually slackening her pace. "I am ashamed to confess it," she said at last, "but I can go no farther. It is so long since I was out of doors that I have almost forgotten how to walk."

"Fortunately we are almost there," replied the priest; and indeed a moment afterward young Poignet drew up at the corner of the foot-path leading to the Borderie. Telling the baron that the journey was ended, he gave a low whistle, like that which had warned Marie-Anne of his arrival a few hours before. No one appeared or replied, so he whistled again in a louder key, and then a third time with all his might—still there was no response. Madame d'Escorval and the abbe had now overtaken the cart. "It's very strange that Marie-Anne doesn't hear me," remarked young Poignet, turning to them. "We can't take the baron to the house until we have seen her. She knows that very well. Shall I run up and warn her?"

"She's asleep, perhaps," replied the abbe; "stay with your horse, my boy, and I'll go and wake her."

He certainly did not feel the least uneasiness. All was calm and still outside, and a bright light shone through the windows of the upper floor. Still, when he perceived the open door, a vague presentiment of evil stirred his heart. "What can this

mean?" he thought. There was no light in the lower rooms, and he had to feel for the staircase with his hands. At last he found it and went up. Another open door was in front of him; he stepped forward and reached the threshold. Then, so suddenly that he almost fell backward, he paused horror-stricken at the sight before him. Poor Marie-Anne was lying on the floor. Her eyes, which were wide open, were covered with a white film; her tongue was hanging black and swollen from her mouth. "Dead!" faltered the priest; "dead!" But this could not be. The abbe conquered his weakness, and approaching the poor girl, he took her by the hand. "Poisoned!" he murmured: "poisoned with arsenic." He rose to his feet, and was casting a bewildered glance around the room when his eyes fell on his medicine chest standing open on a side-table. He rushed toward it, took out a vial, uncorked it, and turned it over on the palm of his hand—it was empty. "I was not mistaken!" he exclaimed.

But he had no time to lose in conjectures. The first thing to be done was to induce the baron to return to the farmhouse without telling him of the terrible misfortune which had occurred. It would not be very difficult to find a pretext. Summoning all his courage, the priest hastened back to the wagon, and with well-affected calmness told M. d'Escorval that it would be impossible for him to take up his abode at the Borderie at present, that several suspicious-looking characters had been seen prowling about, and that they must be more prudent than ever now, so as not to render Martial's intervention useless. At last, but not without considerable reluctance, the baron yielded. "As you desire it, cure," he sighed, "I must obey. Come, Poignot, my boy, drive me back to your father's house."

Madame d'Escorval took a seat in her cart beside her husband. The priest stood watching them as they drove off, and it was not until the sound of the wheels had died away in the distance that he ventured to return to the Borderie. He was climbing the stairs again when he heard a faint moan in the room where Marie-Anne was lying. The sound sent all his blood wildly rushing to his heart, and with one bound he had reached the upper floor. Beside the corpse a young man was kneeling, weeping bitterly. The expression of his face, his attitude, his sobs betrayed the wildest despair. He was so lost in grief that he did not observe the abbe's entrance. Who was this mourner who had found his way to the house of

death? At last, however, though he did not recognize him, the priest divined who he must be. "Jean!" he cried, "Jean Lacheneur!" The young fellow sprang to his feet with a pale face and threatening look. "Who are you?" he asked vehemently. "What are you doing here? What do you want with me?"

The former cure of Sairmeuse was so effectually disguised by his peasant dress and long beard that he had to name himself. "You, Monsieur Abbe," exclaimed Jean. "It is God who has sent you here! Marie-Anne can not be dead! You, who have saved so many others, will save her." But as the priest sadly pointed to heaven, the young fellow paused, and his face became more ghastly looking than before. He understood now that there was no hope. "Ah!" he murmured in a desponding tone, "fate shows us no mercy. I have been watching over Marie-Anne from a distance; and this evening I was coming to warn her to be cautious, for I knew she was in great danger. An hour ago, while I was eating my supper in a wine-shop at Sairmeuse, Grollet's son came in. 'Is that you, Jean?' said he. 'I just saw Chupin hiding near your sister's house; when he observed me, he slunk away.' When I heard that, I hastened here like a crazy man. I ran, but when fate is against you, what can you do? I arrived too late!"

The abbe reflected for a moment. "Then you suppose it was Chupin?" he asked.

"I don't suppose; I feel certain that it was he—the miserable traitor!—who committed this foul deed."

"Still, what motive could he have had?"

With a discordant laugh that almost seemed a yell, Jean answered: "Oh, you may be certain that the daughter's blood will yield him a richer reward than did the father's. Chupin has been the instrument; but it was not he who conceived the crime. You will have to seek higher for the culprit, much higher, in the finest chateau of the country, in the midst of an army of retainers at Sairmeuse."

"Wretched man, what do you mean?"

"What I say." And he coldly added: "Martial de Sairmeuse is the assassin."

The priest recoiled. "You are mad!" he said severely.

But Jean gravely shook his head. "If I seem so to you, sir," he replied, "it is only because you are ignorant of Martial's

wild passion for Marie-Anne. He wanted to make her his mistress. She had the audacity to refuse the honor; and that was a crime for which she must be punished. When the Marquis de Sairmeuse became convinced that Ladheneur's daughter would never be his, he poisoned her, that she might not belong to any one else." All efforts to convince Jean of the folly of his accusations would at that moment have been vain. No proofs would have convinced him. He would have closed his eyes to all evidence.

"To-morrow, when he is more calm, I will reason with him," thought the abbe; and then he added aloud: "We can't allow the poor girl's body to remain here on the floor. Help me, and we will place it on the bed."

Jean trembled from head to foot, and his hesitation was perceptible; but at last, after a severe struggle, he complied. No one had ever yet slept on this bed which Charlonineau had destined for Marie-Anne, saying to himself that it should be for her, or for no one. And Marie-Anne it was who rested there the first—sleeping the sleep of death. When the sad task was accomplished, Jean threw himself into the same armchair in which Marie-Anne had breathed her last, and with his face buried in his hands, and his elbows resting on his knees, he sat there as silent and motionless as the statues of sorrow placed above the last resting places of the dead.

In the mean while the abbe knelt by the bedside and began reciting the prayers for the departed, entreating God to grant peace and happiness in heaven to her who had suffered so much on earth. But he prayed only with his lips, for in spite of all his efforts, his mind would persist in wandering. He was striving to solve the mystery that enshrouded Marie-Anne's death. Had she been murdered? Was it possible that she had committed suicide? The latter idea occurred to him without his having any great faith in it; but, on the other hand, how could her death possibly be the result of crime? He had carefully examined the room, and had discovered nothing that betrayed a stranger's visit. All he could prove was that his vial of arsenic was empty, and that Marie-Anne had been poisoned by absorbing it in the broth, a few drops of which were left in the bowl standing on the mantelpiece. "When morning comes," thought the abbe, "I will look outside."

Accordingly, at daybreak he went into the garden and made a careful examination of the premises. At first he saw nothing

that gave him the least clue, and he was about to abandon his investigations when, on entering the little grove, he espied a large dark stain on the grass a few paces off. He went nearer—it was blood! In a state of great excitement, he summoned Jean, to inform him of the discovery.

"Some one has been murdered here," said young Lacheneur; "and only last night, for the blood has scarcely had time to dry."

"The victim must have lost a great deal of blood," remarked the priest; "it might be possible to discover who he was by following these stains."

"Yes, I will try," replied Jean with alacrity. "Go into the house, sir; I will soon be back again."

A child might have followed the trail of the wounded man, for the blood-stains left along his line of route were so frequent and distinct. These telltale marks led to Chupin's hovel, the door of which was closed. Jean rapped, however, without the slightest hesitation, and when the old poacher's eldest son opened the door, he perceived a very singular spectacle. The dead body had been thrown on to the ground, in a corner of the hut, the bedstead was overturned and broken, all the straw had been torn from the mattress, and the dead man's wife and sons, armed with spades and pickaxes, were wildly overturning the beaten soil that formed the hovel's only floor. They were seeking for the hidden treasure, for the twenty thousand francs in gold, paid for Lacheneur's betrayal! "What do you want?" asked the widow roughly.

"I want to see Father Chupin."

"Can't you see that he's been murdered," replied one of the sons. And brandishing his pick close to Jean's head, he added: "And you're the murderer, perhaps. But that's for justice to determine. Now decamp if you don't want me to do for you."

Jean could scarcely restrain himself from punishing young Chupin for his threat, but under the circumstances a conflict was scarcely permissible. Accordingly, he turned without another word, hastened back to the Borderie. Chupin's death upset all his plans, and greatly irritated him. "I swore that the wretch who betrayed my father should perish by my hand," he murmured; "and now I am deprived of my vengeance. Some one has cheated me out of it. Who could it be? Can Martial have assassinated Chupin after he murdered Marie-Anne? The

best way to assure one's self of an accomplice's silence is certainly to kill him."

Jean had reached the Borderie, and was on the point of going upstairs when he fancied he heard some one talking in the back room. "That's strange," he said to himself. "Who can it be?" And yielding to the impulse of curiosity, he tapped against the communicating door.

The abbe instantly made his appearance, hurriedly closing the door behind him. He was very pale and agitated.

"Who's there?" inquired Jean eagerly.

"Why, Maurice d'Escorval and Corporal Bavois."

"My God!"

"And it's a miracle that Maurice has not been upstairs."

"But whence does he come from? Why have we had no news of him?"

"I don't know. He has only been here five minutes. Poor boy! after I told him his father was safe, his first words were: 'And Marie-Anne?' He loves her more devotedly than ever. He comes home with his heart full of her, confident and hopeful; and I tremble—I fear to tell him the truth."

"Yes, it's really too terrible!"

"Now I have warned you; be prudent—and come in." They entered the room together; and both Maurice and the old soldier greeted Jean warmly. They had not seen one another since the duel at La Reche, interrupted by the arrival of the soldiers; and when they separated that day they scarcely expected to meet again.

Now Maurice, however, was in the best of spirits, and it was with a smile on his face that he remarked: "I am glad you've come. There's nothing to fear now." Then turning to the abbe, he remarked: "But I just promised to let you know the reason of my long silence. Three days after we crossed the frontier—Corporal Bavois and I—we reached Turin. We were tired out. We went to a small inn, and they gave us a room with two beds. While we were undressing, the corporal said to me: 'I am quite capable of sleeping two whole days without waking,' while I promised myself at least a good twelve hours' rest; but we reckoned without our host, as you'll see. It was scarcely daybreak when we were suddenly woke up. There were a dozen men in our room, one or two of them in some official costume. They spoke to us in Italian, and ordered us to dress ourselves. They were so numerous that resistance

was useless, so we obeyed; and an hour after we were both in prison, confined in the same cell. You may well imagine what our thoughts were. The corporal remarked to me, in that cool way of his: 'It will require four days to obtain our extradition, and three days to take us back to Montaignac—that's seven; then there'll be one day more to try us, so we've in all just eight days to live.' Bavois said that at least a hundred times during the first five or six days of our confinement, but five months passed by, and every night we went to bed expecting they'd come for us on the following morning. But they didn't come. We were kindly treated. They did not take away my money; and they willingly sold us various little luxuries. We were allowed two hours of exercise every day in the courtyard, and the keepers even lent us several books to read. In short, I shouldn't have had any particular cause for complaint if I had only been allowed to receive or to forward letters, or if I had been able to communicate with my father or Marie-Anne. But we were in the secret cells, and were not allowed to have any intercourse with the other prisoners. At length our detention seemed so strange and became so insupportable that we resolved to obtain some explanation of it at any cost. We changed our tactics. We had hitherto been quiet and submissive: but now we became as violent and unmanageable as possible. The whole prison resounded with our cries and protestations; we were continually sending for the superintendent, and claiming the intervention of the French ambassador. These proceedings at last had the desired effect. One fine afternoon the governor of the jail released us, not without expressing his regret at being deprived of the society of such amiable and charming guests. Our first act, as you may suppose, was to hasten to the ambassador. We didn't see that dignitary, but his secretary received us. He knit his brows when I told my story, and became excessively grave. I remember each word of his reply. 'Sir,' said he, 'I can assure you most positively that any proceedings instituted against you in France have had nothing whatever to do with your detention here.' And I expressed my astonishment frankly. 'One moment,' he added, 'I will give you my opinion. One of your enemies—I leave you to discover which—must exert a powerful influence in Turin. You were in his way, perhaps, and he had you imprisoned by the Piedmontese police.'

Jean Lacheneur struck the table beside him with his clenched



fist. "Ah! the secretary was right!" he exclaimed. "Maurice, it was Martial de Sairmeuse who caused your arrest—"

"Or the Marquis de Courternieu," interrupted the abbe with a warning glance at Jean.

In a moment Maurice's eyes gleamed brilliantly, then, shrugging his shoulders carelessly, he said: "Never mind; I don't wish to trouble myself any more about the past. My father is well again—that is the main thing. We can easily find some way of getting him safely across the frontier. And then Marie-Anne and I—we will tend him so devotedly that he will soon forget it was my rashness that almost cost him his life. He is so good, so indulgent for the faults of others. We will go and reside in Italy or Switzerland, and you shall accompany us, Monsieur le Abbe, and you as well, Jean. As for you, corporal, it's already decided that you belong to our family."

While Maurice spoke in this fashion, so hopefully, so confidently, Jean and the abbe, realizing the bitter truth, sought to avert their faces; but they could not conceal their agitation from young d'Escorval's searching glance. "What is the matter?" he asked with evident surprise.

They trembled, hung their heads, but did not say a word. Maurice's astonishment changed to a vague, inexpressible fear. He enumerated all the misfortunes which could possibly have befallen him.

"What has happened?" he asked in a husky voice. "My father is safe, is he not? You said that my mother would want nothing more if I were only by her side again. Is it Marie-Anne, then—" He hesitated.

"Courage, Maurice," murmured the abbe. "Courage!"

The young fellow tottered as if he were about to fall. He had turned intensely pale. "Marie-Anne is dead!" he exclaimed.

Jean and the abbe were silent.

"Dead!" repeated Maurice; "and no secret voice warned me! Dead! When?"

"She died only last night," replied Jean.

Maurice rose. "Last night?" said he. "In that case, then, she is still here. Where?—upstairs?" And without waiting for a reply he darted toward the staircase so quickly that neither Jean nor the abbe had time to intercept him. With three bounds he reached the room above; he walked straight to the bed, and with a firm hand turned back the sheet that hid his loved one's face. But at the same moment he recoiled with a heart-broken

cry. What! was this the beautiful, the radiant Marie-Anne—she whom he had loved so fervently! He did not recognize her. He could not recognize these distorted features—that swollen, discolored face—these eyes, now almost hidden by the purple swelling round them. When Jean and the priest entered the room they found him standing with his head thrown back, his eyes dilated with terror, his right arm rigidly extended toward the corpse. "Maurice," said the priest gently, "be calm. Courage!"

The young fellow turned with an expression of complete bewilderment upon his features. "Yes," he faltered; "that is what I need—courage!" He staggered as he spoke, and they were obliged to support him to an armchair.

"Be a man," continued the priest. "Where is your energy? To live is to suffer."

He listened, but did not seem to understand. "Live!" he murmured; "why should I live since she is dead?"

His eyes gleamed so strangely that the abbe was alarmed. "If he does not weep, he will most certainly lose his reason!" thought the priest. Then in a commanding voice he added aloud. "You have no right to despair; you owe a sacred duty to your child."

The same remembrance which had given Marie-Anne strength to hold even death itself at bay for a moment saved Maurice from the dangerous trance into which he was sinking. He shuddered as if he had received an electric shock, and springing from his chair, "That is true," he cried. "Take me to my child!"

"Not just now, Maurice; wait a little."

"Where is it? Tell me where it is."

"I can not; I do not know."

An expression of unspeakable anguish stole over Maurice's face, and in a broken voice he said: "What! you don't know? Did she not confide in you?"

"No. I suspected her secret. I alone—"

"You alone! Then the child is perhaps dead. Even if it is living, who can tell where it is?"

"We shall no doubt find a clue."

"You are right," faltered Maurice. "When Marie-Anne knew that her life was in danger, she could not have forgotten her little one. Those who cared for her in her last moments must have received some message for me. I must see those

who watched over her. Who were they?" The priest averted his face. "I asked you who was with her when she died," repeated Maurice in a sort of frenzy. And, as the abbe remained silent, a terrible light dawned on the young fellow's mind. He understood the cause of Marie-Anne's distorted features now. "She perished the victim of a crime!" he exclaimed. "Some monster killed her. If she died such a death, our child is lost forever! And it was I who recommended, who commanded the greatest precautions! Ah! we are all of us cursed!" He sank back in his chair, overwhelmed with sorrow and remorse, and with big tears rolling slowly down his cheeks.

"He is saved!" thought the abbe, whose heart bled at the sight of such intense sorrow.

Jean Lacheneur stood by the priest's side with gloom upon his face. Suddenly he drew the Abbe Midon toward one of the windows: "What is this about a child?" he inquired harshly.

The priest's face flushed. "You have heard," he answered laconically.

"Am I to understand that Marie-Anne was Maurice's mistress, and that she had a child by him? Is that the case? I won't, I can't, believe it! She whom I revered as a saint! What! you would have me believe that her eyes lied—her eyes so chaste, so pure? And he—Maurice—he whom I loved as a brother! So his friendship was only a cloak, which he assumed so as to rob us of our honor!" Jean hissed these words through his set teeth in such low tones that Maurice, absorbed in his agony of grief, did not overhear him. "But how did she conceal her shame?" he continued. "No one suspected it—absolutely no one. And what has she done with her child? Did the thought of disgrace frighten her? Did she follow the example of so many ruined and forsaken women? Did she murder her own child? Ah, if it be alive, I will find it, and in any case Maurice shall be punished for his perfidy as he deserves." He paused; the window was open, and the sound of galloping horses could be plainly heard approaching along the adjacent highway. Both Jean and the abbe leaned forward and looked out. Two horsemen were riding toward the Borderie—the first some ten yards in advance of the other. The former halted at the corner of the garden path, threw his reins to his follower—a groom—and then strode on foot toward the house. On recognizing this visitor, Jean bounded from the window with a yell. He clutched Maurice by the shoulders, and, shaking him vio-

lently, exclaimed: "Up! here comes Martial, Marie-Anne's murderer! Up! he is coming! He is at our mercy!"

Maurice sprang to his feet, infuriated; but the abbe darted to the door and intercepted both young fellows as they were about to leave the room. "Not a word! not a threat!" he said, imperiously. "I forbid it. At least respect the presence of death!" He spoke with such authority, and his glance was so commanding, that both Jean and Maurice involuntarily paused. Before the priest had time to add another word, Martial was there. He did not cross the threshold. One look and he realized the situation. He turned very pale, but not a word escaped his lips. Wonderful as was his usual power of self-control he could not articulate a syllable; and it was only by pointing to the bed on which Marie-Anne's lifeless form was reposing that he asked for an explanation.

"She was infamously poisoned last evening," sadly replied the abbe.

Then Maurice, forgetting the priest's demands, stepped forward. "She was alone and defenseless," he said vehemently. "I have only been at liberty during the last two days. But I know the name of the man who had me arrested at Turin, and thrown into prison. They told me the coward's name! Yes, it was you, you infamous wretch! Ah! you dare not deny it; you confess your guilt, you scoundrel!"

Once again the abbe interposed; he threw himself between the rivals, fearing lest they should come to blows. But the Marquis de Sairmeuse had already resumed his usual haughty and indifferent manner. He took a bulky envelope from his pocket, and threw it on the table. "This," said he coldly, "is what I was bringing to Mademoiselle Lacheneur. It contains, first of all, royal letters of license from his majesty for the Baron d'Escorval, who is now at liberty to return to his old home. He is, in fact, free and saved, for he is granted a new trial, and there can be no doubt of his acquittal. In the same envelope you will also find a decree of non-complicity rendered in favor of the Abbe Midon, and an order from the bishop of the diocese reinstating him as cure of Sairmeuse; and, finally, Corporal Bavois's discharge from the service, drawn up in proper form, with the needful memorandum securing his right to a pension."

He paused, and as his hearers stood motionless with wonder, he turned and approached Marie-Anne's bedside. Then, with

his hand raised to heaven over the lifeless form of her whom he had loved, and in a voice that would have made the murderess tremble in her innermost soul, he solemnly exclaimed: "I swear to you, Marie-Anne, that I will avenge you!" For a few seconds he stood motionless, then suddenly he stooped, pressed a kiss on the dead girl's brow, and left the room.

"And you think that man can be guilty!" exclaimed the abbe. "You see, Jean, that you are mad!"

"And this last insult to my dead sister is an honor, I suppose?" said Jean, with a furious gesture.

"And the wretch binds my hands by saving my father!" exclaimed Maurice.

From his place by the window, the abbe saw Martial vault into the saddle. But the marquis did not take the road to Montaignac. It was toward the Chateau de Courtornieu that he now hastened.



**B**LANCHE'S reason had sustained a frightful shock, when Chupin was obliged to lift and carry her out of Marie-Anne's room. But she well-nigh lost consciousness altogether when she saw the old poacher struck down by her side. However, as will be remembered, Aunt Medea, at least, had some energy in her fright. She seized her bewildered niece's arm, and by dint of dragging and pushing had her back at the chateau in much less time than it had taken them to reach the Borderie. It was half-past one in the morning when they reached the little garden gate, by which they had left the grounds. No one in the chateau had noticed their long absence. This was due to several different circumstances. First of all, to the precautions which Blanche herself had taken in giving orders, before going out, that no one should come to her room, on any pretext whatever, unless she rang. Then it also chanced to be the birthday of the marquis's valet de chambre, and the servants had dined more sumptuously than usual. They had toasts and songs over their dessert; and at the finish of the

repast, they amused themselves with an improvised ball. They were still dancing when Blanche and her aunt returned. None of the doors had yet been secured for the night, and the pair succeeded in reaching Blanche's room without being observed. When the door had been securely closed, and there was no longer any fear of listeners, Aunt Medea attacked her niece.

"Now will you explain what happened at the Borderie; and what you were doing there?" she inquired, in a tone of unusual authority.

Blanche shuddered. "Why do you wish to know?" she asked.

"Because I suffered agony during the hours I was waiting for you in the garden. What was the meaning of those dreadful cries I heard? Why did you call for help? I heard a death-rattle that made my hair stand on end with terror. Why did Chupin have to bring you out in his arms?" She paused for a moment, and then finding that Blanche did not reply: "You don't answer me!" she exclaimed.

The young marquise was longing to annihilate her dependent relative, who might ruin her by a thoughtless word, and whom she would ever have beside her—a living memento of her crime. However, what should she say? Would it be better to reveal the truth, horrible as it was, or to invent some plausible explanation? If she confessed everything she would place herself at Aunt Medea's mercy. But, on the other hand, if she deceived her aunt, it was more than probable that the latter would betray her by some involuntary remark when she heard of the crime committed at the Borderie? Hence, under the circumstances, the wisest plan, perhaps, would be to speak out frankly, to teach her relative her lesson, and try and imbue her with some firmness. Having come to this conclusion, Blanche disdained all concealment. "Ah, well!" she said, "I was jealous of Marie-Anne. I thought she was Martial's mistress. I was half-crazed, and I poisoned her."

She expected a despairing cry, or even a fainting fit, but, to her surprise, Aunt Medea merely shed a few tears—such as she often wept for any trifle—and exclaimed: "How terrible. What if it should be discovered?" In point of fact, stupid as the neglected spinster might be, she had guessed the truth before she questioned her niece. And not merely was she prepared for some such answer, but the tyranny she had endured

for years had well-nigh destroyed all the real moral sensibility she had ever possessed.

On noting her aunt's comparative composure, Blanche breathed more freely. She never imagined that her impoverished relative was already meditating some sort of revenge for all the slights heaped on her in past years; but felt quite convinced that she could count on Aunt Medea's absolute silence and submission. With this idea in her head she began to relate all the circumstances of the frightful drama enacted at the Borderie. In so doing she yielded to a desire stronger than her own will: to the wild longing that often seizes the most hardened criminal, and forces—irresistibly impels him to talk of his crimes, even when he distrusts his confidant. But when she came to speak of the proofs which had convinced her of her lamentable mistake, she suddenly paused in dismay.

What had she done with the marriage certificate signed by the cure of Vigano, and which she remembered holding in her hands? She sprang up, and felt in the pocket of her dress. Ah, she had it safe. It was there. Without again unfolding it she threw it into a drawer, and turned the key.

Aunt Medea wished to retire to her own room, but Blanche entreated her to remain. She was unwilling to be left alone—she dared not—she was afraid. And as if she desired to silence the inward voice tormenting her, she talked on with extreme volubility, repeating again and again that she was ready to do anything in expiation of her crime, and vowing that she would overcome all impossibilities in her quest for Marie-Anne's child. The task was both a difficult and dangerous one, for an open search for the child would be equivalent to a confession of guilt. Hence, she must act secretly, and with great caution. "But I shall succeed," she said. "I will spare no expense." And remembering her vow, and her dying victim's threats, she added: "I must succeed. I swore to do so, and I was forgiven under those conditions."

In the mean while, Aunt Medea sat listening in astonishment. It was incomprehensible to her that her niece, with her dreadful crime still fresh in her mind, could coolly reason, deliberate, and make plans for the future. "What an iron will!" thought the dependent relative; but in her bewilderment she quite overlooked one or two circumstances that would have enlightened any ordinary observer.

Blanche was seated on her bed with her hair unbound; her

eyes were glistening with delirium, and her incoherent words and excited gestures betrayed the frightful anxiety that was torturing her. And she talked and talked, now narrating, and now questioning Aunt Medea, and forcing her to reply, only that she might escape from her own thoughts. Morning had already dawned, and the servants could be heard bustling about the chateau, while Blanche, oblivious of everything around her, was still explaining how, in less than a year, she could hope to restore Marie-Anne's child to Maurice d'Escorval. She paused abruptly in the middle of a sentence. Instinct had suddenly warned her of the danger she incurred in making the slightest change in her habits. Accordingly, she sent Aunt Medea away; then, at the usual hour, rang for her maid. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and she was just completing her toilet, when the ring of the outer bell announced a visitor. Almost immediately her maid, who had just previously left her, returned, evidently in a state of great excitement.

"What is the matter?" inquired Blanche, eagerly. "Who has come?"

"Ah, madame—that is, mademoiselle, if you only knew—"

"Will you speak?"

"The Marquis de Sairmeuse is downstairs in the blue drawing-room; and he begs mademoiselle to grant him a few minutes' conversation."

Had a thunderbolt riven the earth at her feet, the murderess could not have been more terrified. Her first thought was that everything had been discovered; for what else could have brought Martial there? She almost decided to send word that she was not at home, or that she was extremely ill, when reason told her that she was perhaps alarming herself needlessly, and that in any case the worst was preferable to suspense. "Tell the marquis that I will be with him in a moment," she at last replied.

She desired a few minutes solitude to compose her features, to regain her self-possession, if possible, and conquer the nervous trembling that made her shake like a leaf. But in the midst of her uneasiness a sudden inspiration brought a malicious smile to her lip. "Ah!" she thought, "my agitation will seem perfectly natural. It may even be of service." And yet, as she descended the grand staircase, she could not help saying to herself: "Martial's presence here is incomprehensible."

It was certainly very extraordinary; and he himself had not



come to Courtornieu without considerable hesitation. But it was the only means he had of procuring several important documents which were indispensable in the revision of M. d'Escorval's case. These documents, after the baron's condemnation, had been left in the Marquis de Courtornieu's hands. Now that the latter had gone out of his mind, it was impossible to ask him for them; and Martial was obliged to apply to his wife for permission to search for them among her father's papers. He had said to himself that morning: "I will carry the baron's letters of license to Marie-Anne, and then I will push on to Courtornieu."

He arrived at the Borderie gay and confident, his heart full of hope; and found that Marie-Anne was dead. The discovery had been a terrible blow for Martial; and his conscience told him that he was not free from blame; that he had, at least, facilitated the perpetration of the crime. For it was indeed he who, by an abuse of influence, had caused Maurice's arrest at Turin. But though he was capable of the basest perfidy when his love was at stake, he was incapable of virulent animosity. Marie-Anne was dead; he had it in his power to revoke the benefits he had conferred, but the thought of doing so never once occurred to him. And when Jean and Maurice upbraided him, his only revenge was to overwhelm them by his magnanimity. When he left the Borderie, pale as a ghost, his lips still cold from the kiss still printed on the dead girl's brow, he said to himself: "For her sake, I will go to Courtornieu. In memory of her, the baron must be saved."

By the expression of the servants' faces as he leaped from the saddle in the courtyard of the chateau and asked to see Madame Blanche, he was again reminded of the sensation which this unexpected visit would necessarily cause. However, he cared little for it. He was passing through a crisis in which the mind can conceive no further misfortune, and becomes indifferent to everything. Still he trembled slightly when they ushered him into the blue drawing-room. He remembered the room well, for it was here that Blanche had been wont to receive him in days gone by, when his fancy was wavering between her and Marie-Anne. How many pleasant hours they had passed together here! He seemed to see Blanche again, as she was then, radiant with youth, gay and smiling. Her manner was affected, perhaps, but still it had seemed charming at the time.

At this very moment, Blanche entered the room. She looked so sad and careworn that her husband scarcely knew her. His heart was touched by the look of patient sorrow seemingly stamped upon her features. "How much you must have suffered, Blanche," he murmured, scarcely knowing what he said.

It cost her an effort to repress her secret joy. She at once realized that he knew nothing of her crime; and noting his emotion, she perceived the profit she might derive from it. "I can never cease to regret having displeased you," she replied, in a sad, humble voice. "I shall never be consoled."

She had touched the vulnerable spot in every man's heart. For there is no man so skeptical, so cold, or so heartless but his vanity is not flattered with the thought that a woman is dying for his sake. There is no man who is not moved by such a flattering idea; and who is not ready and willing to give, at least, a tender pity in exchange for such devotion.

"Is it possible that you could forgive me?" stammered Martial. The wily enchantress averted her face as if to prevent him from reading in her eyes a weakness of which she felt ashamed. This simple gesture was the most eloquent of answers. But Martial said no more on this subject. He asked for permission to inspect M. de Courtornieu's papers with the view of finding the documents he required for M. d'Escorval's case, and Blanche readily complied with his request. He then turned to take his leave, and fearing perhaps the consequences of too formal a promise he merely added: "Since you don't forbid it, Blanche, I will return—to-morrow—another day." However, as he rode back to Montagnac, his thoughts were busy. "She really loves me," he mused; "that pallor, that weariness could not be feigned. Poor girl! she is my wife, after all. The reasons that influenced me in my quarrel with her father exist no longer, for the Marquis de Courtornieu may be considered as dead."

All the inhabitants of Sairmeuse were congregated on the market-place when Martial rode through the village. They had just heard of the murder at the Borderie, and the abbe was now closeted with the magistrate, relating as far as he could the circumstances of the crime. After a prolonged inquiry, it was eventually reported that a man known as Chupin, a notoriously bad character, had entered the house of Marie-Anne Lacheneur, and taken advantage of her absence to mingle poison with her food; and the said Chupin had been

himself assassinated soon after his crime by a certain Balstain, whose whereabouts were unknown.

However, this affair soon interested the district far less than the constant visits which Martial was paying to Madame Blanche. Shortly afterward it was rumored that the Marquis and the Marquise de Sairmeuse were reconciled; and indeed a few weeks later, they left for Paris with an intention of residing there permanently. A day or two after their departure, the eldest of the Chupins also announced his determination of taking up his abode in the same great city. Some of his friends endeavored to dissuade him, assuring him that he would certainly die of starvation; but with singular assurance, he replied: "On the contrary, I have an idea that I shan't want for anything as long as I live there."



**T**IME gradually heals all wounds; and its effacing fingers spare but few traces of events; which in their season may have absorbed the attention of many thousand minds. What remained to attest the reality of that fierce whirlwind of passion which had swept over the peaceful valley of the Oiselle? Only a charred ruin on La Reche, and a grave in the cemetery, on which was inscribed: "Marie-Anne Lacheneur, died at the age of twenty. Pray for her!" Recent as were the events of which that ruin and that gravestone seemed as it were the prologue and the epilogue, they were already relegated to the legendary past. The peasantry of Sairmeuse had other things to think about—the harvest, the weather, their sheep and cattle, and it was only a few old men, the politicians of the village, who at times turned their attention from agricultural incidents to remember the rising of Montaignac. Sometimes, during the long winter evenings, when they were gathered together at the local hostelry of the Bœuf Couronne, they would lay down their greasy cards and gravely discuss the events of the past year. And they never failed to remark that almost all the actors of that bloody drama at Montaignac had, in common parlance, "come

to a bad end." The victors and the vanquished seemed to encounter the same fate. Lacheneur had been beheaded; Chanlouineau, shot; Marie-Anne, poisoned; and Chupin, the traitor, the Duc de Sairmeuse's spy, stabbed to death. It was true that the Marquis de Courtornieu lived, or rather survived, but death would have seemed a mercy in comparison with such a total annihilation of intelligence. He had fallen below the level of a brute beast, which at least is endowed with instinct. Since his daughter's departure he had been ostensibly cared for by two servants, who did not allow him to give them much trouble, for whenever they wished to go out they complacently confined him, not in his room, but in the back cellar, so as to prevent his shrieks and ravings from being heard outside. If some folks supposed for a while that the Sairmeuses would escape the fate of the others, they were grievously mistaken, for it was not long before the curse fell upon them as well.

One fine December morning, the duke left the chateau to take part in a wolf-hunt in the neighborhood. At nightfall, his horse returned, panting, covered with foam, and riderless. What had become of his master? A search was instituted at once, and all night long a score of men, carrying torches, wandered through the woods, shouting and calling at the top of their voices. Five days went by, and the search for the missing man was almost abandoned, when a shepherd lad, pale with fear, came to the chateau to tell the steward that he had discovered the Duc de Sairmeuse's body—lying all bloody and mangled at the foot of a precipice. It seemed strange that so excellent a rider should have met with such a fate; and there might have been some doubt as to its being an accident, had it not been for the explanation given by several of his grace's grooms. "The duke was riding an exceedingly vicious beast," these men remarked. "She was always taking fright and shying at everything."

A few days after this occurrence Jean Lacheneur left the neighborhood. This singular fellow's conduct had caused considerable comment. When Marie-Anne died, although he was her natural heir, he at first refused to have anything to do with her property. "I don't want to take anything that came to her through Chanlouineau," he said to every one right and left, thus slandering his sister's memory, as he had slandered her when alive. Then, after a short absence from the district, and with-

out any apparent reason, he suddenly changed his mind. He not only accepted the property, but made all possible haste to obtain possession of it. He excused his past conduct as best he could; but if he was to be believed, instead of acting in his own interest, he was merely carrying his sister's wishes into effect, for he over and over again declared that whatever price her property might fetch not a sou of its value would go into his own pockets. This much is certain, as soon as he obtained legal possession of the estate, he sold it, troubling himself but little as to the price he received, provided the purchasers paid cash. However, he reserved the sumptuous furniture of the room on the upper floor of the Borderie and burnt it—from the bedstead to the curtains and the carpet—one evening in the little garden in front of the house. This singular act became the talk of the neighborhood, and the villagers universally opined that Jean had lost his head. Those who hesitated to agree with this opinion, expressed it a short time afterward, when it became known that Jean Lacheneur had engaged himself with a company of strolling players who stopped at Montaignac for a few days. The young fellow had both good advice and kind friends. M. d'Escorval and the abbe had exerted all their eloquence to induce him to return to Paris, and complete his studies; but in vain.

The priest and the baron no longer had to conceal themselves. Thanks to Martial de Sairmeuse, they were now installed, the former at the parsonage and the latter at Escorval, as in days gone by. Acquitted at his new trial, reinstalled in possession of his property, reminded of his frightful fall only by a slight limp, the baron would have deemed himself a fortunate man had it not been for his great anxiety on his son's account. Poor Maurice! The nails that secured Marie-Anne's coffin ere it was lowered into the sod seemed to have pierced his heart; and his very life now seemed dependent on the hope of finding his child. Relying already on the Abbe Midon's protection and assistance, he had confessed everything to his father, and had even confided his secret to Corporal Bavois, who was now an honored guest at Escorval; and all three had promised him their best assistance. But the task was a difficult one, and such chances of success as might have existed were greatly diminished by Maurice's determination that Marie-Anne's name should not be mentioned in prosecuting the search. In this he acted very differently to Jean. The latter slandered his mur-

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dered sister right and left, while Maurice sedulously sought to prevent her memory being tarnished.

The Abbe Midon did not seek to turn Maurice from his idea. "We shall succeed all the same," he said kindly; "with time and patience any mystery can be solved." He divided the department into a certain number of districts; and one of the little band went day by day from house to house questioning the inmates, in the most cautious manner, for fear of arousing suspicion; for a peasant becomes intractable if his suspicions are but once aroused. However, weeks went by, and still the quest was fruitless. Maurice was losing all hope. "My child must have died on coming into the world," he said, again and again.

But the abbe reassured him. "I am morally certain that such was not the case," he replied. "By Marie-Anne's absence I can tell pretty nearly the date of her child's birth. I saw her after her recovery; she was comparatively gay and smiling. Draw your own conclusions."

"And yet there isn't a nook or corner for miles round which we haven't explored."

"True; but we must extend the circle of our investigations."

The priest was now only striving to gain time, which, as he knew full well, is the sovereign balm for sorrow. His confidence had been very great at first, but it had sensibly diminished since he had questioned an old woman, who had the reputation of being one of the greatest gossips of the community. On being skilfully catechised by the abbe, this worthy dame replied that she knew nothing of such a child, but that there must be one in the neighborhood, as this was the third time she had been questioned on the subject. Intense as was his surprise, the abbe succeeded in concealing it. He set the old gossip talking, and after two hours' conversation, he arrived at the conclusion that two persons in addition to Maurice were searching for Marie-Anne's child. Who these persons were, and what their aim was, were points which the abbe failed to elucidate. "Ah," thought he, "after all, rascals have their use on earth. If we only had a man like Chupin to set on the trail!"

The old poacher was dead, however, and his eldest son—the one who knew Blanche's secret—was in Paris. Only the widow and the second son remained at Sairmeuse. They had not, as yet, succeeded in discovering the twenty thousand francs, but

the fever for gold was still burning in their veins, and they persisted in their search. From morn till night the mother and son toiled on, until the earth round their hut had been fully explored to the depth of six feet. However, a peasant passed by one day and made a remark which suddenly caused them to abandon their search. "Really, my boy," he said, addressing young Chupin, "I didn't think you were such a fool as to persist in bird's-nesting after the chick was hatched and had flown. Your brother in Paris can no doubt tell you where the treasure was concealed."

"Holy Virgin! you're right!" cried the younger Chupin. "Wait till I get money enough to take me to Paris, and we'll see."



**M**ARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE'S unexpected visit to the Chateau de Courtornieu had alarmed Aunt Medea even more than it had alarmed Blanche. In five minutes, more ideas passed through the dependent relative's mind than during the last five years. In fancy she already saw the gendarmes at the chateau; her niece arrested, confined in the Montaignac prison, and brought before the Assize Court. She might herself remain quiet if that were all there was to fear! But suppose she was compromised, suspected of complicity as well, dragged before the judges, and even accused of being the only culprit! At this thought her anxiety reached a climax, and finding the suspense intolerable, she ventured downstairs. She stole on tiptoe into the great ballroom, and applying her ear to the keyhole of the door leading into the blue salon, she listened attentively to Blanche and Martial's conversation. What she heard convinced her that her fears were groundless. She drew a long breath, as if a mighty burden had been lifted from her breast. But a new idea, which was to grow, flourish, and bear fruit, had just taken root in her mind. When Martial left the room, she at once opened the door by which she was standing, and entered the

blue reception-room, thus admitting as it were that she had been a listener. Twenty-four hours earlier she would not even have dreamed of committing such an audacious act. "Well," she exclaimed, "Blanche, we were frightened for nothing."

Blanche did not reply. The young marquise was weighing in her mind the probable consequences of all these events which had succeeded each other with such marvelous rapidity. "Perhaps the hour of my revenge is nigh," she murmured, as if communing with herself.

"What do you say?" inquired Aunt Medea, with evident curiosity.

"I say, aunt, that in less than a month I shall be the Marquise de Sairmeuse in reality as well as in name. My husband will return to me, and then—oh! then."

"God grant it!" said Aunt Medea, hypocritically. In her secret heart she had but scant faith in this prediction, and cared very little whether it was realized or not. However, in that low tone which accomplices habitually employ, she ventured to add: "If what you say proves true, it will only be another proof that your jealousy led you astray; and that—that what you did at the Borderie was a perfectly unnecessary act."

Such had indeed been Blanche's opinion; but now she shook her head, and gloomily replied: "You are wrong; what took place at the Borderie has brought my husband back to me again. I understand everything now. It is true that Marie-Anne was not his mistress; but he loved her. He loved her, and her repulses only increased his passion. It was for her sake that he abandoned me; and while she lived he would never have thought of me. His emotion on seeing me was the remnant of an emotion which she had awakened. His tenderness was only the expression of his grief. Whatever happens, I shall only have her leavings—the leavings of what she disdained!" The young marquise spoke bitterly, her eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot as she added: "So I shan't regret what I have done! no, never—never!" As she spoke she felt herself again brave and determined.

But the horrible fears assailed her when the inquiry into the circumstances of the murder commenced. Officials had been sent from Montaignac to investigate the affair. They examined a host of witnesses, and there was even some talk of



sending to Paris for one of those detectives skilled in unraveling all the mysteries of crime. This prospect quite terrified Aunt Medea; and her fear was so apparent that it caused Blanche great anxiety. "You will end by betraying us," she remarked, one evening.

"Ah! I can't control my fears."

"If that is the case, don't leave your room."

"It would be more prudent, certainly."

"You can say you are not well; your meals shall be served you upstairs."

Aunt Medea's face brightened. In her heart, she was delighted. It had long been her dream and ambition to have her meals served in her own room, in bed in the morning and on a little table by the fire in the evening; but as yet she had never been able to realize this fancy. On two or three occasions, feeling slightly indisposed, she had asked to have her breakfast brought to her room, but her request had each time been harshly refused. "If Aunt Medea is hungry, she will come downstairs, and take her place at the table as usual," had been Blanche's imperious reply.

It was hard, indeed, to be treated in this way in a chateau where there were always a dozen servants idling about. But now, in obedience to the young marquise's formal orders, the head cook himself came up every morning into Aunt Medea's room, to receive her instructions; and she was at perfect liberty to dictate each day's bill of fare, and to order the particular dishes she preferred. This change in the dependent relative's situation awakened many strange thoughts in her mind, and stifled such regret as she had felt for the crime at the Borderie. Still both she and her niece followed the inquiry which had been set on foot with a keen interest. They obtained all the latest information concerning the investigation through the butler of the chateau, who seemed much interested in the case, and who had won the good-will of the Montaignac police agents, by making them familiar with the contents of his wine cellar. It was from this major-domo that Blanche and her aunt learned that all suspicions pointed to the deceased Chupin, who had been seen prowling round about the Borderie on the very night the crime was committed. This testimony was given by the same young peasant who had warned Jean Lacheneur of the old poacher's doings. As regards the motive of the crime, fully a score of persons

had heard Chapin declare that he should never enjoy any peace of mind as long as a single Lacheneur was left on earth. So thus it happened that the very incidents which might have ruined Blanche, saved her; and she really came to consider the old poacher's death as a providential occurrence, for she at least had no reason to suspect that he had revealed her secret before expiring. When the butler told her that the magistrate and police agents had returned to Montaignac, she could scarcely conceal her joy; and drawing a long breath of relief, she turned toward Aunt Medea with the remark: "Ah, now there's nothing more to be feared."

She had, indeed, escaped the justice of man; but the justice of God remained. A few weeks previously the thought of divine retribution would perhaps have made Blanche smile, for she then considered the punishment of Providence as an imaginary evil, invented to hold timorous minds in check. On the morning that followed her crime, and after her long random talk with Aunt Medea, she almost shrugged her shoulders at the thought of Marie-Anne's dying threats. She remembered her promise; and yet, despite all she had said, she did not intend to fulfil it. After careful consideration, she had come to the conclusion that in trying to find the missing child she would expose herself to terrible risks; and on the other hand she felt certain that the child's father would discover it. So she dismissed the matter from her mind, and chiefly busied herself with what Martial had said during his visit, and the prospect that presented itself of a reconciliation.

But she was destined to realize the power of her victim's threats that same night. Worn out with fatigue, she retired to her own room at an early hour, and jumped into bed, exclaiming; "I must sleep!" But sleep had fled. Her crime was ever in her thoughts; and rose before her in all its horror and atrocity. She knew that she was lying on her bed, at Courtornieu; and yet it seemed as if she were still in Chauloineau's house, first pouring out the poison, and then watching its effects, while concealed in the dressing-room. She was struggling against the idea; exerting all her strength of will to drive away these terrible memories, when she imagined she heard the key turn in the lock. Raising her head from the pillow with a start, she fancied she could perceive the door open noiselessly, and then Marie-Anne glided into the room like a phantom. She seated herself in an armchair near the

bed, and while the tears rolled down her cheeks, she looked sadly yet threateningly around her. The murderess hid her face under the counterpane. She shivered with terror, and a cold sweat escaped from every pore in her skin. For this seemed no mere apparition, but the frightful reality itself. Blanche did not submit to these tortures without resisting. Making a vigorous effort, she tried to reason with herself aloud, as if the sound of her voice would reassure her. "I am dreaming!" she said. "The dead don't return to life. To think that I'm childish enough to be frightened at fancies which only exist in my own imagination."

She said this, but the vision did not fade. When she shut her eyes the phantom still faced her—even through her closed eyelids, and through the coverlids drawn up over her face. Say what she would, she did not succeed in sleeping till day-break. And, worst of all, night after night, the same vision haunted her, reviving the terror which she forgot during the daytime in the broad sunlight. For she would regain her courage and become skeptical again as soon as the morning broke. "How foolish it is to be afraid of something that does not exist!" she would remark, railing at herself. "To-night I will conquer this absurd weakness." But when evening came all her resolution vanished, and scarcely had she retired to her room than the same fears seized hold of her, and the same phantom rose before her eyes. She fancied that her nocturnal agonies would cease when the investigation anent the murder was over—that she would forget both her crime and promise; but the inquiry finished, and yet the same vision haunted her, and she did not forget. Darwin has remarked that it is when their safety is assured that great criminals really feel remorse, and Blanche might have vouched for the truth of this assertion, made by the deepest thinker and closest observer of the age.

And yet her sufferings, atrocious as they were, did not induce her for one moment to abandon the plan she had formed on the occasion of Martial's visit. She played her part so well that, moved with pity, if not with love, he returned to see her frequently, and at last, one day, besought her to allow him to remain. But even this triumph did not restore her peace of mind. For between her and her husband rose the dreadful vision of Marie-Anne's distorted features. She knew only too well that Martial had no love to give her, and that

she would never have the slightest influence over him. And to crown her already intolerable sufferings came an incident which filled her with dismay. Alluding one evening to Marie-Anne's death, Martial forgot himself, and spoke of his oath of vengeance. He deeply regretted that Chupin was dead, he said, for he should have experienced an intense delight in making the wretch who murdered her die a lingering death in the midst of the most frightful tortures. As he spoke his voice vibrated with still powerful passion, and Blanche, in terror asked herself what would be her fate if her husband ever discovered that she was the culprit—and he might discover it. Now it was that she began to regret she had not kept her promise; and she resolved to commence the search for Marie-Anne's child. But to do this effectually it was essential she should be in a large city—in Paris, for instance—where she could procure discreet and skilful agents. Thus it was necessary to persuade Martial to remove to the capital. But with the Duc de Sairmeuse's assistance she did not find this a very difficult task; and one morning, with a radiant face, she informed Aunt Medea that she and her husband would leave Courtornieu at the end of the coming week.

In the midst of her anxiety, Blanche had failed to notice that Aunt Medea was no longer the same. The change in the dependent relative's tone and manner had, it is true, been a gradual one; it had not struck the servants, but it was none the less positive and real, and now it showed itself continually. For instance, the offtime tyrannized-over chaperon no longer trembled when any one spoke to her, as formerly had been her wont, and there was occasionally a decided ring of independence in her voice. If visitors were present, she had been used to remain modestly in the background, but now she drew her chair forward, and unhesitatingly took part in the conversation. At table, she gave free expression to her preferences and dislikes; and on two or three occasions she had ventured to differ from her niece in opinion, and had even been so bold as to question the propriety of some of her orders. One day, moreover, when Blanche was going out, she asked Aunt Medea to accompany her; but the latter declared she had a cold, and remained at home. And, on the following Sunday, although Blanche did not wish to attend vespers, Aunt Medea declared her intention of going; and as it rained she requested the coachman to harness the horses to the car-

riage, which was done. All these little incidents could have been nothing separately, but taken together they plainly showed that the once humble chaperon's character had changed. When her niece announced that she and Martial were about to leave the neighborhood, Aunt Medea was greatly surprised, for the project had never been discussed in her presence. "What! you are going away," she repeated; "you are leaving Court-nieu?"

"And without regret."

"And where are you going to, pray?"

"To Paris. We shall reside there permanently; that's decided. The capital's the proper place for my husband, and, with his name, fortune, talents and the king's favor, he will secure a high position there. He will repurchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and furnish it magnificently, so that we shall have a princely establishment."

Aunt Medea's expression plainly indicated that she was suffering all the torments of envy. "And what is to become of me?" she asked, in plaintive tones.

"You—amnt! You will remain here; you will be mistress of the chateau. A trustworthy person must remain to watch over my poor father. You will be happy and contented here, I hope."

But no; Aunt Medea did not seem satisfied. "I shall never have courage to stay all alone in this great chateau," she whined.

"You foolish woman! won't you have the servants, the gardeners, and the concierge to protect you?"

"That makes no difference. I am afraid of insane people. When the marquis began to rave and howl this evening, I felt as if I should go mad myself."

Blanche shrugged her shoulders. "What do you wish then?" she asked sarcastically.

"I thought—I wondered—if you wouldn't take me with you."

"To Paris! You are crazy, I do believe. What would you do there?"

"Blanche, I entreat you, I beseech you, to do so!"

"Impossible, aunt, impossible!"

Aunt Medea seemed to be in despair. "And what if I told you that I can't remain here—that I dare not—that I should die!"

Blanche flushed with impatience. "You weary me beyond

endurance," she said roughly. And with a gesture that increased the harshness of her words, she added: "If Courtornieu displeases you so much, there is nothing to prevent you from seeking a home more to your taste. You are free and of age."

Aunt Medea turned very pale, and bit her lips. "That is to say," she said at last, "that you allow me to take my choice between dying of fear at Courtornieu and ending my days in a hospital. Thanks, my niece, thanks. That is like you. I expected nothing less from you. Thanks!" She raised her head, and her once humble eyes gleamed in a threatening fashion. "Very well! this decides me," she continued. "I entreated you, and you brutally refused my request, so now I command you and I say, 'I will go!' Yes, I intend to go with you to Paris—and I shall go. Ah! so it surprises you to hear poor, meek, much-abused Aunt Medea speak like this; but I've endured a great deal in silence for a long time, and now I rebel. My life in this house has been like life in hell. It is true you've given me shelter—fed and lodged me, but you've taken my entire life in exchange. What servant ever endured what I've had to endure? Have you ever treated one of your maids as you have treated me—your own flesh and blood? And I have had no wages; on the contrary, I was expected to be grateful since I lived by your tolerance. Ah, you have made me pay dearly for the crime of being poor. How you have insulted me—humiliated me—trampled me under foot!"

The rebellious chaperon paused again. The bitter rancor which had been accumulating in her heart for years fairly choked her; but after a moment she resumed in a tone of irony: "You ask me what I should do in Paris? I should enjoy myself, like you. You will go to court, to the play—into society, won't you? Very well, I will accompany you. I will attend these fêtes. I will have handsome toilets, too. I have rarely seen myself in anything but shabby black woolen dresses. Have you ever thought of giving me the pleasure of possessing a handsome dress? Twice a year, perhaps, you have given me a black silk, recommending me to take good care of it. But it was not for my sake that you went to this expense. It was for your own sake, and in order that your poor relation should do honor to your generosity. You dressed me in it, like you put your lackeys in livery, through vanity. And I endured all this; I made myself insignificant and humble; and when I was buffeted on one cheek, I offered the other. For after all

I must live—I must have food. And you, Blanche, how often you have said to me so that I might do your bidding, 'You must obey me if you wish to remain at Courtornieu!' And I obeyed you—I was forced to obey, as I didn't know where else to go. Ah! you have abused my poverty in every way; but now my turn has come!"

Blanche was so amazed that she could scarcely articulate a syllable, and it was in a scarcely audible voice that at last she faltered: "I don't understand you, aunt; I don't understand you."

The poor dependent shrugged her shoulders as her niece had done a few moments before. "In that case," said she slowly, "I may as well tell you, that since you have made me your accomplice against my will, we must share everything in common. I share the danger; so I will share the pleasure. Suppose everything should be discovered? Do you ever think of that? Yes, I've no doubt you do, and that's why you are seeking diversion. Very well! I desire diversion also, so I shall go to Paris with you."

With a desperate effort Blanche managed to regain some degree of self-possession. "And if I still said no?" she coldly queried.

"But you won't say no."

"And why not, if you please?"

"Because—"

"Will you go to the authorities and denounce me?"

Aunt Medea shook her head. "I am not such a fool," she retorted. "I should only compromise myself. No. I shouldn't do that; but I might, perhaps, tell your husband what happened at the Borderie."

Blanche shuddered. No other threat could have had such influence over her. "You shall accompany us, aunt," said she; "I promise it." And then in a gentle voice she added: "But it's quite unnecessary to threaten me. You have been cruel, aunt, and at the same time unjust. If you have been unhappy in our house, you have only yourself to blame. Why haven't you ever said anything? I attributed your complaisance to your affection for me. How was I to know that a woman so quiet and modest as yourself longed for fine dresses. Confess that it was impossible. Had I known— But rest easy, aunt, I will atone for my neglect." And as Aunt Medea, having obtained all she desired, stammered an excuse, "Non-

sense!" rejoined Blanche; "let us forget this foolish quarrel. You forgive me, don't you?" And the two ladies embraced each other with the greatest effusion, like two friends united after a misunderstanding.

Neither of them, however, was in the least degree deceived by this mock reconciliation. "It will be best for me to keep on the alert," thought the dependent relative. "God only knows with what joy my dear niece would send me to join Marie-Anne."

Perhaps a similar thought flitted through Blanche's mind. "I'm bound to this dangerous, perfidious creature forever now," she reflected. "I'm no longer my own mistress; I belong to her. When she commands me, I must obey, no matter what may be her fancy—and she has forty years' humiliation and servitude to avenge." The prospect of such a life made the young marquise tremble; and she racked her brain to discover some way of freeing herself from such intolerable thralldom. Would it be possible to induce Aunt Medea to live independently in her own house, served by her own servants? Might she succeed in persuading this silly old woman, who still longed for finery, to marry? A handsome marriage portion will always attract a husband. However, in either case, Blanche would require money—a large sum of money, which no one must be in a position to claim an account of. With this idea she took possession of over two hundred and fifty thousand francs, in bank-notes and coin, belonging to her father, and put away in one of his private drawers. This sum represented the Marquis de Courtornieu's savings during the past three years. No one knew he had laid it aside, except his daughter; and now that he had lost his reason, Blanche could take it for her own use without the slightest danger. "With this," thought she, "I can enrich Aunt Medea whenever I please without having recourse to Martial."

After these incidents there was a constant exchange of delicate attentions and fulsome affection between the two ladies. It was "my dearest little aunt," and "my dearly beloved niece," from morning until night; and the gossips of the neighborhood, who had often commented on the haughty disdain with which Blanche treated her relative, would have found abundant food for comment had they known that during the journey to Paris Aunt Medea was protected from the possibility of cold by a mantle lined with costly fur, exactly like the marquise's own, and that instead of traveling in the cumbersome berlin with



the servants, she had a seat in the postchaise with the Marquis de Sairmeuse and his wife.

Before their departure Martial had noticed the great change which had come over Aunt Medea and the many attentions which his wife lavished on her, and one day, when he was alone with Blanche, he exclaimed in a tone of good-natured raillery: "What's the meaning of all this attachment? We shall finish by encasing this precious aunt in cotton, shan't we?"

Blanche trembled and flushed. "I love good Aunt Medea so much!" said she. "I never can forget all the affection and devotion she lavished on me when I was so unhappy."

It was such a plausible explanation that Martial took no further notice of the matter; and, indeed, just then his mind was fully occupied. The agent he had despatched to Paris in advance, to purchase the Hotel de Sairmeuse, if it were possible, had written asking the marquis to hasten his journey, as there was some difficulty about concluding the bargain. "Plague take the fellow!" angrily said Martial on receiving this news. "He is quite stupid enough to let this opportunity, which we've been waiting for during the last ten years, slip through his fingers. I shan't find any pleasure in Paris if I can't own our old residence."

He was so impatient to reach the capital that, on the second day of their journey, he declared that if he were alone he would travel all night. "Do so now," said Blanche graciously; "I don't feel the least tired, and a night of travel does not frighten me." So they journeyed on without stopping, and the next morning at about nine o'clock they alighted at the Hotel Meurice.

Martial scarcely took time to eat his breakfast. "I must go and see my agent at once," he said as he hurried off. "I will soon be back." Two hours afterward he reappeared with a radiant face. "My agent was a simpleton," he exclaimed. "He was afraid to write me word that a man, on whom the conclusion of the sale depends, requires a bonus of fifty thousand francs. He shall have it and welcome." Then, in a tone of gallantry, habitual to him whenever he addressed his wife, he added: "It only remains for me to sign the papers, but I won't do so unless the house suits you. If you are not too tired, I would like you to visit it at once. Time presses, and we have many competitors."

This visit was, of course, one of pure form; but Blanche would have been hard to please if she had not been satisfied

with this mansion, then one of the most magnificent in Paris, with a monumental entrance facing the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain and large umbrageous gardens, extending to the Rue de Varennes. Unfortunately, this superb dwelling had not been occupied for several years, and required considerable repair. "It will take at least six months to restore everything," said Martial, "perhaps more; though in three months, possibly, a portion of it might be arranged very comfortably."

"It would be living in one's own house, at least," observed Blanche, divining her husband's wishes.

"Ah! then you agree with me! In that case, you may rest assured that I will expedite matters as swiftly as possible."

In spite, or rather by reason of his immense fortune, the Marquis de Sairmeuse knew that one is never so well, nor so quickly, served as when one serves one's self, and so he resolved to take the matter into his own hands. He conferred with the architect, interviewed the contractors, and hurried on the workmen. As soon as he was up in the morning he started out without waiting for breakfast, and seldom returned before dinner. Although Blanche was compelled to pass most of her time indoors, on account of the bad weather, she was not inclined to complain. Her journey, the unaccustomed sights and sounds of Paris, the novelty of life in a hotel, all combined to divert her thoughts from herself. She forgot her fears, a sort of haze enveloped the terrible scene at the Borderie, and the clamors of conscience were sinking into faint whispers. Indeed the past seemed fading away, and she was beginning to entertain hopes of a new and better life, when one day a servant knocked at the door and said: "There is a man downstairs who wishes to speak with madame."



**B**LANCHE was reclining on a sofa listening to a new book which Aunt Medea was reading aloud, and she did not even raise her head as the servant delivered his message. "A man?" she said carelessly; "what man?" She was expecting no one;

it must be one of the assistants or overseers employed by Martial.

"I can't inform madame who he is," replied the servant. "He is quite young; he is dressed like a peasant, and is, perhaps, seeking a place."

"It is probably the marquis he wishes to see."

"Madame will excuse me, but he particularly said that he wished to speak with her."

"Ask his name and business then. Go on, aunt," she added; "we have been interrupted in the most interesting part."

But Aunt Medea had not time to finish the page before the servant returned. "The man says madame will understand his business when she hears his name."

"And his name?"

"Chupin."

It seemed as if a bombshell had burst into the room. Aunt Medea dropped her book with a shriek, and sank back, half fainting in her chair. Blanche sprang up with a face as colorless as her white cashmere morning dress, her eyes dazed, and her lips trembling. "Chupin," she repeated, as if she almost hoped the servant would tell her she had not understood him correctly; "Chupin!" Then, angrily, she added: "Tell this man I won't see him, I won't see him, do you hear?" But before the servant had time to bow and retire, the young marquise changed her mind. "One moment," said she; "on reflection I think I will see him. Bring him up."

The servant then withdrew, and the two ladies looked at each other in silent consternation. "It must be one of Chupin's sons," faltered Blanche at last.

"No doubt; but what does he desire."

"Money, probably."

Aunt Medea raised her eyes to heaven. "God grant that he knows nothing of your meetings with his father!" said she.

"You are not going to despair in advance, are you, aunt? We shall know everything in a few minutes. Pray remain calm. Turn your back to us; look out of the window into the street and don't let him see your face."

Blanche was not deceived. This unexpected visitor was indeed Chupin's eldest son; the one to whom the dying poacher had confided his secret. Since his arrival in Paris, the young fellow had been running in every direction, inquiring everywhere and of everybody for the Marquis de Sairmeuse's address.

At last he obtained it; and he lost no time in presenting himself at the Hotel Meurice. He was now awaiting the result of his application at the entrance downstairs, where he stood whistling, with his hands in his pockets, when the servant returned and bade him follow. Chupin obeyed; but the servant, who was on fire with curiosity, loitered by the way in hope of obtaining from this country youth some explanation of the surprise, not to say fright, with which Madame de Sairmeuse had greeted the mention of his name. "I don't say it to flatter you, my boy," he remarked, "but your name produced a great effect on madame." The prudent peasant carefully concealed the joy he felt on receiving this information. "How does she happen to know you?" continued the servant. "Are you both from the same place?"

"I am her foster-brother."

The servant did not believe this reply for a moment, and as they had now reached the marquise's apartment, he opened the door and ushered Chupin into the room. The latter had prepared a little story beforehand, but he was so dazzled by the magnificence around him that for a moment he stood motionless with staring eyes and gaping mouth. His wonder was increased by a large mirror opposite the door, in which he could survey himself from head to foot, and by the beautiful flowers on the carpet, which he feared to crush with his heavy boots.

After a moment, Blanche decided to break the silence. "What do you want of me?" she asked.

In a rambling fashion young Chupin then explained that he had been obliged to leave Sairmeuse on account of the numerous enemies he had there, that he had been unable to find his father's hidden treasure, and that he was consequently without resources.

"That'll do," interrupted Blanche, and then in far from a friendly manner, she remarked: "I don't at all understand why you should apply to me. You and all the rest of your family have anything but an enviable reputation at Sairmeuse; still, as you are from that part of the country, I am willing to aid you a little on condition you don't apply to me again."

Chupin listened to this homily with a half cringing, half impudent air; but when Blanche had finished he raised his head, and proudly said: "I don't ask for alms."

"What do ask for, then?"

"My dues."

Blanche's heart sank, and yet she had courage enough to glance disdainfully at Chupin, and reply: "What! do I owe you anything?"

"You don't owe me anything personally, madame; but you owe a heavy debt to my deceased father. Whose service did he perish in? Poor old man! he loved you devotedly. His last words were about you. 'A terrible thing has just happened at the Borderie, my boy,' said he. 'The young marquise hated Marie-Anne, and she has poisoned her. If it hadn't been for me she would have been lost. I am about to die, so let the whole blame rest on me; for it won't hurt me when I'm under the sod, and it will save the young lady. And by and by she will reward you; so that as long as you keep the secret you will want for nothing.'" Great as was young Chupin's impudence he paused abruptly, amazed by the air of perfect composure with which Blanche listened to him. In face of such wonderful dissimulation he almost doubted the truth of his father's story.

The marquise's self-possession was indeed surprising. She felt that if she once yielded she would always be at this wretch's mercy, as she already was at Aunt Medea's. "In other words," said she calmly, "you accuse me of having murdered Mademoiselle Lacheneur; and you threaten to denounce me if I don't yield to your demands." Chupin nodded his head in acquiescence. "Very well!" added Blanche, "since that's the case, you may go."

It seemed, indeed, that by audacity she might win this dangerous game on which her future peace depended. Chupin, greatly abashed, was standing before her undecided what course to pursue, when Aunt Medea, who was listening by the window, turned in affright, exclaiming: "Blanche! your husband—Martial! He is coming!"

The game was lost. Blanche fancied her husband entering and finding Chupin there, conversing with him, and so discovering everything! Her brain whirled; she yielded. Hastily thrusting her purse into Chupin's hand, she dragged him through an inner door to the servants' staircase. "Take this," she said in a hoarse whisper. "I will see you again. And not a word—not a word to my husband, remember!"

She had been wise to yield in time. When she returned to the drawing-room she found Martial there. He was gazing on the ground, and held an open letter in his hand. But he raised

his head when his wife entered the room, and she could detect signs of great emotion in his features. "What has happened?" she faltered.

Martial did not remark her troubled manner. "My father is dead, Blanche," he replied.

"The Duc de Sairmeuse! Good heavens! how did it happen?"

"He was thrown from his horse in the forest near the Sanguille rocks."

"Ah! it was there where my poor father was nearly murdered."

"Yes, the very place."

There was a moment's silence. Martial's affection for his father had not been very deep, and he was well aware that the duke had but little love for him. Hence he was astonished at the bitter grief he felt on hearing of his death. "From this letter, which was forwarded by a messenger from Sairmeuse," he continued, "I gather that everybody believes it to have been an accident; but I—I—"

"Well?"

"I believe he was murdered."

An exclamation of horror escaped Aunt Medea, and Blanche turned pale. "Murder!" she whispered.

"Yes, Blanche; and I could name the murderer. Oh! I am not deceived. My father's murderer is the same man who tried to kill the Marquis de Courtornieu—"

"Jean Lacheneur!"

Martial gravely bowed his head. It was his only reply.

"And will you not denounce him? Will you not demand justice?"

Martial's face grew gloomy. "What good would it do?" he replied. "I have no material proofs to furnish, and justice requires unimpeachable evidence." Then, as if communing with his own thoughts, rather than addressing his wife, he added, despondingly: "The Duc de Sairmeuse and the Marquis de Courtornieu have reaped what they sowed. The blood of murdered innocence always calls for vengeance. Sooner or later the guilty must expiate their crimes."

Blanche shuddered. Each word found an echo in her own soul. Had her husband intended his words for her, he would scarcely have expressed himself differently. "Martial," said she, trying to arouse him from his gloomy reverie; "Martial!"

But he did not seem to hear her, and it was in the same tone

that he continued: "These Lacheneurs were happy and honored before our arrival at Sairmeuse. Their conduct was above all praise; their probity amounted to heroism. We might have made them our faithful and devoted friends. It was our duty, as well as our interest, to have done so. But we did not understand it; we humiliated, ruined, exasperated them. It was a fault for which we must atone. Who knows but what in Jean Lacheneur's place I should have done exactly what he has done?" He was again silent for a moment; then, with one of those sudden inspirations that sometimes enable one almost to read the future, he resumed: "I know Jean Lacheneur. I can fathom his hatred, and I know that he lives only in the hope of vengeance. It is true that we are very high and he is very low, but that matters little. We have everything to fear. Our millions form a rampart around us, but he will know how to open a breach. And no precautions will save us. At the very moment when we feel ourselves secure, he will be ready to strike. What he will attempt, I don't know; but his will be a terrible revenge. Remember my words, Blanche, if ruin ever overtakes our house, it will be Jean Lacheneur's work."

Aunt Medea and her niece were too horror-stricken to articulate a word, and for five minutes no sound broke the stillness save Martial's monotonous tread, as he paced up and down the room. At last he paused before his wife. "I have just ordered post-horses," he said. "You will excuse me for leaving you here alone. I must go to Sairmeuse at once, but I shall not be absent more than a week."

He left Paris a few hours later, and Blanche became a prey to the most intolerable anxiety. She suffered more than she had done during the days that immediately followed her crime. It was not against phantoms that she had to shield herself now; Chupin existed, and his voice, even if it were not as terrible as the voice of conscience, might make itself heard at any moment. If she had known where to find him, she would have gone to him, and endeavored, by the payment of a large sum of money, to persuade him to leave France. But he had left the hotel without giving her his address. Then again Martial's gloomy apprehensions combined to increase her fears, and the mere thought of Jean Lacheneur made her shrink with terror. She could not rid herself of the idea that Jean suspected her guilt, and was watching her, waiting for revenge. Her wish

to find Marie-Anne's child now became stronger than ever; it seemed to her that the abandoned infant might be a protection to her some day. However, where could she find an agent in whom she could confide? At last she remembered that she had heard her father speak of a detective named Chefteux as an exceedingly shrewd fellow, capable of anything, even of honesty if he were well paid. This man was really a perfect scoundrel, one of Fouche's vilest instruments, who had served and betrayed all parties, and who, at last, after the most barefaced perjury, had been dismissed from the police force. He had then established a private inquiry office, and after some little search Blanche ascertained that he lived in the Place Dauphine. One morning, taking advantage of her husband's absence, she donned her simplest dress, and, accompanied by Aunt Medea, repaired to Chefteux's residence. He proved to be a middle-aged man of medium height and inoffensive mien, and he cleverly affected an air of good humor. He ushered his client into a neatly furnished drawing-room, and Blanche at once told him that she was a married woman; that she lived with her husband in the Rue St. Denis; and that one of her sisters who had lately died had been led astray by a man who had disappeared. A child was living, however, whom she was very anxious to find. In short, she narrated an elaborate story which she had prepared in advance, and which, after all, sounded very plausible. Chefteux, however, did not believe a word of it; for as soon as it was finished he tapped Blanche familiarly on the shoulder, and remarked: "In short, my dear, we had our little escapades before our marriage."

Blanche shrank back as if some venomous reptile had touched her. To be treated in this fashion! she—a Courtornieu, now Duchess de Sairmeuse! "I think you are laboring under a wrong impression," she haughtily replied.

He made haste to apologize; but while listening to the further details he asked for, he could not help remarking to himself: "What eyes! what a voice!—they can't belong to a denizen of the Rue Saint-Denis!" His suspicions were confirmed by the reward of twenty thousand francs, which Blanche imprudently promised him in case of success, and by the five hundred francs which she paid in advance. "And where shall I have the honor of writing to you, madame?" he inquired.

"Nowhere," replied Blanche. "I shall be passing by here from time to time, and I will call."



When the two women left the house, Chefteux followed them. "For once," thought he, "I believe that fortune smiles on me." To discover his new client's name and rank was but child's play for Fouche's former pupil; and indeed his task was all the easier since they had no suspicion whatever of his designs.

Blanche, who had heard his powers of discernment so highly praised, was confident of success, and all the way back to the hotel she was congratulating herself on the step she had taken. "In less than a month," she said to Aunt Medea, "we shall have the child; and it will be a protection to us."

But the following week she realized the extent of her imprudence. On visiting Chefteux again, she was received with such marks of respect that she at once saw she was known. Still, she would have made another attempt to deceive the detective, but he checked her. "First of all," he said, with a good-humored smile, "I ascertain the identity of the persons who honor me with their confidence. It is a proof of my ability, which I give gratis. But madame need have no fears. I am discreet by nature and by profession. Many ladies of the highest rank are in the position of Madame la Duchesse."

So Chefteux still believed that the Duchess de Sairmeuse was searching for her own child. She did not try to convince him to the contrary, for it was better he should believe this than suspect the truth.

Blanche's position was now truly pitiable. She found herself entangled in a net, and each movement, far from freeing her, tightened the meshes round her. Three persons were acquainted with the secret which threatened her life and honor; and under these circumstances, how could she hope to prevent it from becoming more widely known? She was, moreover, at the mercy of three unscrupulous masters; and at a word, a gesture, or a look from them, her haughty spirit must bow in meek subservience. And her time, moreover, was no longer at her own disposal; for Martial had returned, and they had taken up their abode at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, where the young duchess was compelled to live under the scrutiny of fifty servants, more or less interested in watching her, in criticizing her acts, and discovering her thoughts. Aunt Medea, it is true, was of great assistance. Blanche purchased a new dress for her whenever she bought one for herself, took her about with her on all occasions, and the dependent relative expressed her satisfaction in the most enthusiastic terms, de-

claring her willingness to do anything for her benefactress. Nor did Chefteux give Blanche much more annoyance. Every three months he presented a memorandum of investigation expenses, which usually amounted to some ten thousand francs; and so long as she paid him it was plain he would be silent. He had given her to understand, however, that he should expect an annuity of twenty-four thousand francs; and once, when Blanche remarked that he must abandon the search if nothing had been discovered at the end of two years: "Never," replied he; "I shall continue the search as long as I live."

In addition to these two there was Chupin, who proved a constant terror. Blanche had been compelled to give him twenty thousand francs to begin with. He declared that his younger brother had come to Paris in pursuit of him, accusing him of having stolen their father's hoard, and demanding his share with his knife in his hand. There had been a battle, and it was with his head bound up in blood-stained linen that Chupin made his appearance before Blanche. "Give me the sum that the old man buried," said he, "and I will allow my brother to think I stole it. It is not very pleasant to be regarded as a thief, when one's an honest man, but I will bear it for your sake. If you refuse, however, I shall be compelled to tell him where I've obtained my money, and how." Naturally enough Blanche complied with this demand, for how could she do otherwise?

If her tormentor possessed all his father's vices, depravity, and cold-blooded perversity, he had certainly not inherited the parental intelligence or tact. Instead of taking the precautions which his interests required, he seemed to find a brutal pleasure in compromising the duchess. He was a constant visitor at the Hotel de Sairmeuse. He called at all hours, morning, noon, and night, without in the least troubling himself about Martial. And the servants were amazed to see their haughty mistress unhesitatingly leave everything to receive this suspicious-looking character, who smelled so strongly of tobacco and alcohol. One evening, while a grand entertainment was progressing at the Hotel de Sairmeuse, he made his appearance, half drunk, and imperiously ordered the servants to go and tell Madame Blanche that he was there, waiting for her. She hastened to him in her magnificent evening dress, her face white with rage and shame beneath her tiara of diamonds. And when, in her exasperation, she refused to give the wretch what he demanded:

"So that's to say I'm to starve while you are reveling here!" he exclaimed. "I am not such a fool. Give me some money at once, or I will tell everything I know on the spot!" What could she do? She was obliged to yield, as she had always done before. And yet he grew more and more insatiable every day. Money filtered through his fingers as fast as water filters through a sieve. But he did not think of raising his vices to the height of the fortune which he squandered. He did not even provide himself with decent clothing, and from his appearance he might have been supposed to be a penniless beggar. One night he was arrested for fomenting a row in a low drinking-den, and the police, surprised at finding so much gold in such a beggarly-looking rascal's possession, accused him of being a thief. But he mentioned the name of the Duchesse de Sairmeuse, and on the following morning—Martial fortunately was in Vienna at the time—an inspector of police presented himself at the mansion in the Rue de Grenelle, and Blanche had to undergo the humiliation of confessing that she had given a large sum of money to this man, whose family she had known, and who, she added, had once rendered her an important service.

Sometimes her pertinacious tormentor changed his tactics. For instance, he declared that he disliked coming to the Hotel de Sairmeuse, as the servants treated him as if he were a mendicant; so whenever he required money he would write. And effectively, every week or so, there came a letter bidding Blanche bring such a sum, to such a place, and at such an hour. And the proud duchess was always punctual at the rendezvous. Soon afterward the rascal met, heaven knows where! a certain Aspasie Clapard, to whom he took a violent fancy, and although she was much older than himself, he wished to marry her. It was Blanche who paid for the wedding feast. Then Chupin again announced his desire of establishing himself in business, having resolved, he said, to live by his own exertions. So he purchased a wine merchant's stock, which the duchess paid for, and which he drank in no time. Next, his wife gave birth to a child, and Madame de Sairmeuse must pay for the baptism as she had paid for the wedding, only too happy that Chupin did not require her to stand as godmother to little Polyte, which idea he had at first entertained. On two occasions Blanche accompanied her husband to Vienna and to London, where he went on important diplomatic missions. She

remained abroad during three years, and during all that time she received at least one letter every week from Chupin. Ah! many a time she envied her victim's lot! What was Marie-Anne's death compared with the life she led! Her sufferings were measured by years, Marie-Anne's by minutes; and she said to herself, again and again, that the tortures of poison could not be so intolerable as was her agony.



IT may be asked how it was that Martial had failed to discover or to suspect this singular state of affairs; but a moment's reflection will explain his ignorance. The head of a family, whether he dwells in an attic or in a palace, is always the last to know what is going on in his own home. He does not even suspect circumstances, with which every one else is fully acquainted; and, in Martial's case, the life he led was scarcely likely to lead him to the truth; for after all he and his wife were virtually strangers to one another. His manner toward her was perfect, full of deference and chivalrous courtesy; but they had nothing in common except a name and certain interests. Each lived his own life. They met only at dinner, or at the entertainments they gave—which were considered the most brilliant of Parisian society. The duchess had her own apartments, her private servants, carriages, horses, and table. At five-and-twenty, Martial, the last descendant of the great house of Sairmeuse—a man on whom destiny had apparently lavished every blessing—who was young, who possessed unbounded wealth, and a brilliant intellect, found himself literally overburdened with *ennui*. Marie-Anne's death had destroyed all his hopes of happiness; and realizing the emptiness of his life, he sought to fill the void with bustle and excitement. He threw himself headlong into politics, striving to find some relief from his despondency in the pleasures of power and satisfied ambition.

It is only just to say that Blanche had remained superior to circumstances; and that she had played the part of a happy,

contented woman with consummate skill. Her frightful sufferings and anxiety never marred the haughty serenity of her features. She soon won a place as one of the queens of Parisian society; and plunged into dissipation with a sort of frenzy. Was she endeavoring to divert her mind? Did she hope to overpower thought by excessive fatigue? To Aunt Medea alone did Blanche reveal her secret heart. "I am like a culprit who has been bound to the scaffold, and abandoned there by the executioner to live, as it were, till the ax falls of its own accord." And the ax might fall at any moment. A word, a trifle, an unlucky chance—she dared not say "a decree of Providence," and Martial would know everything. Such, in all its unspeakable horror, was the position of the beautiful and envied Duchesse de Sairmeuse. "She must be perfectly happy," said the world; but she felt herself sliding down the precipice to the awful depths below. Like a shipwrecked mariner clinging to a floating spar, she scanned the horizon with a despairing eye, and could only see the threatening clouds that betokened the coming tempest. Once it happened that six weeks went by without any news coming from Chupin. A month and a half! What had become of him? To Madame Blanche this silence was as ominous as the calm that precedes the storm. A line in a newspaper solved the mystery, however. Chupin was in prison. After drinking more heavily than usual one evening, he had quarreled with his brother, and killed him by a blow on the head with an iron bar. Lacheneur's blood was being visited on his betrayer's children. Chupin was tried, condemned to twenty years' hard labor, and sent to Brest. But this sentence afforded the duchess no relief. The culprit had written to her from his Paris prison; and he found the means to write to her from Brest. He confided his letters to comrades, whose terms of imprisonment had expired, and who came to the Hotel de Sairmeuse demanding an interview with the duchess. And she received them. They told her all the miseries they had endured "out there"; and usually ended by requesting some slight assistance.

One morning a man whose desperate manner quite frightened her brought the duchess this laconic note: "I am tired of starving here; I wish to make my escape. Come to Brest; you can visit the prison, and we will decide on some plan. If you refuse to do this, I shall apply to the duke, who will obtain my pardon in exchange for what I will tell him." Blanche was

dumb with horror. It was impossible, she thought, to sink lower than this.

"Well!" said the returned convict, harshly. "What answer shall I take to my comrade?"

"I will go—tell him I will go!" she said, driven to desperation. And in fact she made the journey, and visited the prison, but without finding Chupin. There had been a revolt the previous week, the troops had fired on the prisoners, and Chupin had been killed. Still the duchess dared not rejoice, for she feared that her tormentor had told his wife the secret of his power.

Indeed the widow—the Aspasia Clapard already mentioned—promptly made her appearance at the house in the Rue de Grenelle; but her manner was humble and supplicating. She had often heard her dear dead husband say that madame was his benefactress, and now she came to beg a little aid to enable her to open a small wine-shop. Her son Polyte—ah! such a good son! just eighteen years old, and such a help to his poor mother—had found a little house in a good situation for business, and if they only had three or four hundred francs—Blanche cut the story short by handing her supplicant a five hundred-franc note. "Either that woman's humility is a mask," thought the duchess, "or her husband has told her nothing."

Five days later Polyte Chupin presented himself. They needed three hundred francs more before they could commence business, he said, and he came on behalf of his mother to entreat the kind lady to advance them that amount. But being determined to discover exactly how she was situated, with regard to the widow, the duchess curtly refused, and the young fellow went off without a word. Evidently the mother and son were ignorant of the facts. Chupin's secret had died with him.

This happened early in January. Toward the close of February, Aunt Medea contracted inflammation of the lungs on leaving a fancy ball, which she attended in an absurd costume, in spite of all the attempts which her niece made to dissuade her. Her passion for dress killed her. Her illness lasted only three days; but her sufferings, physical and mental, were terrible. Constrained by fear of death to examine her own conscience, she saw plainly enough that profiting by her niece's crime had been as culpable as if she had actually aided her in committing it. Aunt Medea had been very devout in former

years, and now her superstitious fears were reawakened and intensified. Her faith returned, followed by a train of terrors. "I am lost, I am lost!" she cried, tossing to and fro on her bed; writhing and shrieking as if she already saw hell opening to engulf her. She called on the Holy Virgin and all the saints to protect her. She entreated Heaven to grant her time for repentance and expiation; and she even begged to see a priest, swearing she would make a full confession.

Paler than the dying woman, but still implacable, Blanche watched over her, aided by one of her maids in whom she had most confidence. "If this lasts long, I shall be ruined," she thought. "I shall be obliged to call for assistance, and she will betray me."

But it did not last long. The patient's delirium was followed by such utter prostration that it seemed as if each moment would be her last. But toward midnight she revived a little, and in a voice of intense feeling, she faltered: "You have had no pity on me, Blanche. You have deprived me of all hope in the life to come. Heaven will punish you. You will die like a dog yourself, and alone without a word of Christian counsel or encouragement. I curse you!" And she expired, just as the clock was striking two.

The time when Blanche would have given almost anything to know that Aunt Medea was under the ground had long since passed away. Now the poor old woman's death deeply affected her. She had lost an accomplice who had often consoled her, and she had gained nothing in return. Every one who was intimately acquainted with the Duchesse de Sairmeuse noticed her dejection, and was astonished by it. "Is it not strange," remarked her friends, "that the duchess—such a very superior woman—should grieve so much for that absurd relative of hers?" But Blanche's dejection was due in great measure to the sinister prophecies faltered by her dying aunt, to whom for self-protection she had denied the last consolations of religion. And as her mind reviewed the past she shuddered as the Sairmeuse peasants had done, when thinking of the fatality which pursued those who had shed, or helped to shed, so much innocent blood. What misfortunes had overtaken them all—from Chupin's sons to her father, the Marquis de Courtornieu, in whose mind not one spark of reason had gleamed for ten long years before his death. The Baron and the Baroness d'Escorval and old Corporal Bavois had departed this life within a

month of each other the previous year, mourned by every one, so that of all the people of diverse condition who had been connected with the troubles of Montaignac, Blanche knew of only four who were still alive: Maurice d'Escorval, who having studied the law, was now an investigating magistrate attached to the tribunal of the Seine; the Abbe Midon, who had come to Paris with Maurice, and Martial and herself.

There was another person at the recollection of whom she trembled, and whose name she dared not utter. This was Jean Lacheneur, Marie-Anne's brother. He had disappeared, and so completely that it might have been fancied he was dead, but an inward voice, more powerful than reason, told Blanche that this enemy was still alive, watching for his hour of vengeance. More troubled by her presentiments now than she had been by Chupin's persecutions in days gone by, Madame de Sairmeuse decided to apply to Chefteux in order to ascertain, if possible, what she had to expect. Fouche's former agent had not wavered in his devotion to the duchess. Every three months he presented his bill, which was paid without discussion; and to ease his conscience, he sent one of his men two or three times a year to prowl round Sairmeuse for a while. Animated by the hope of a magnificent reward, the spy promised his client, and—what was more to the purpose—promised himself, that he would discover this dreaded enemy. He started in quest of him, and had already begun to collect proofs of Jean's existence, when his investigations abruptly came to a close. One morning a man's body, literally hacked to pieces, was found in an old well not far from Sairmeuse. It was Chefteux, who had been murdered by some one who remained unknown. When Blanche read this news in a local journal she felt as a culprit might feel on hearing his death-warrant read. "The end is near," she murmured. "Lacheneur is coming."

The duchess was not mistaken. Jean had told the truth when he declared that he was not disposing of his sister's estate for his own benefit. In his opinion, Marie-Anne's fortune must be consecrated to one sacred purpose; and he would not divert the slightest portion of it to his personal requirements. He was absolutely penniless when the manager of a traveling theatrical company sojourning at Montaignac engaged him for a consideration of forty-five francs a month. From that day he lived the precarious life of a strolling player. He was poorly paid, and often reduced to abject poverty by lack



of engagements, or the impecuniosity of managers. His hatred had lost none of its virulence; but to wreak the vengeance he wished to wreak, he must have time and money at his disposal. But how could he accumulate money when he was often too poor even to appease his hunger? Still he did not renounce his hopes. His was a rancor which was only intensified by years. He was biding his time while he watched from the depths of his misery the brilliant fortunes of the house of Sairmeuse. He had waited sixteen years, when one of his friends procured him an engagement in Russia. The engagement was nothing; but during his stay at St. Petersburg the poor comedian was fortunate enough to obtain an interest in a theatrical enterprise, from which he realized a clear profit of a hundred thousand francs in less than six years. "Now," said he, "I can give up this life, for I have money enough to begin the struggle." And six weeks later he arrived at his native village.

Before carrying any of his designs into execution, he went to Sairmeuse to visit Marie-Anne's grave, the sight of which he felt would fan his smoldering animosity, and give him all the determination he needed as the cold, stern avenger of crime. This was his only motive in going, but, on the very evening of his arrival he learned through a garrulous old peasant woman that ever since his departure—that is to say, for a period of twenty years—two parties had been making persistent inquiries for a child which had been placed somewhere in the neighborhood. Jean knew that it was Marie-Anne's child they were seeking, and why they had not succeeded in finding it. But why were there two persons prosecuting these investigations? One was Maurice d'Escorval, of course, but who was the other? This information induced Jean to prolong his stay at Sairmeuse, where he tarried a whole month. By the expiration of that time he had traced the inquiries, which he could not at first comprehend, to one of Chefteux's agents. Through the latter, he reached Fouche's former spy himself; and finally succeeded in discovering that the second search had been instituted by no less a person than the Duchesse de Sairmeuse. This discovery bewildered him. How could Blanche have known that Marie-Anne had given birth to a child; and, knowing it, what possible interest could she have had in finding this abandoned babe, now grown to manhood? These two questions puzzled Jean considerably, and he could give them no satisfactory answer. "Chupin's son could tell me perhaps," he thought, "but

to obtain information from that quarter, I must pretend to be reconciled to the sons of the wretch who betrayed my father."

However, the traitor's children had been dead for several years, and after a long search, Jean only found the Widow Chupin, *nee* Aspasia Clapard, and her son Polyte. They were keeping a drinking-den not far from the Rue des Chateau-des-Rentiers; and their establishment, known as the Poivriere, enjoyed anything but an enviable reputation. Lacheneur cautiously questioned the widow and her son. He asked them if they knew of the crime at the Borderie—if they had heard that grandfather Chupin had committed murder and had been assassinated in his turn—if they had ever been told of an abandoned child, and of searches prosecuted to find it. But neither of these two had ever been at Sairmeuse in their lives, and when Lacheneur mentioned his name in hopes it might recall some recollection, they declared they had never heard it before. Jean was about to take his departure, despondently enough, when Mother Chupin, probably in the hope of pocketing a few pence, began to deplore her present misery, which was, she declared, all the harder to bear as she had wanted for nothing during her poor husband's lifetime, for he had always obtained as much money as he wanted from a lady of high degree, called the Duchesse de Sairmeuse.

Lacheneur uttered such a frightful oath that the old woman and her son started back in astonishment. He saw at once the close connection between Blanche's search for the child and her generosity to Chupin. "It was she who poisoned Marie-Anne," he said to himself. "It must have been through my sister herself that she became aware of the child's existence. She loaded the young Chupin with favors because he knew the crime she had committed—that crime in which his father had been only an accomplice."

He remembered Martial's oath at the murdered girl's bedside, and his heart overflowed with savage exultation. For he could already see his two enemies, the last of the Sairmeuses and the last of the Courtornieus, consummating his work of vengeance themselves. However, after all, this was mere conjecture; he must at any price ascertain whether his suppositions were correct. Drawing from his pocket several pieces of gold, and, throwing them on the table, he said: "I am rich; if you will obey me and keep my secret, your fortune is made."

A shrill cry of delight from mother and son outweighed any protestations of obedience. The Widow Chupin knew how to write, and Lacheneur then dictated this letter to her: "Madame la Duchesse—I shall expect you at my establishment to-morrow between twelve and four o'clock. It is on business connected with the Borderie. If at five o'clock I have not seen you, I shall carry to the post a letter for the duke."

"And if she comes, what am I to say to her?" asked the astonished widow.

"Nothing; you will merely ask her for money."

"If she comes, it is as I have guessed," he reflected.

She came. Hidden in the loft of the Poivriere, Jean, through an opening in the floor, saw the duchess hand Mother Chupin a bank-note. "Now, she is in my power!" he thought exultantly. "And I will drag her through sloughs of degradation before I deliver her up to her husband's vengeance!"



A FEW lines of the article consecrated to Martial in the "General Biography of Men of the Time," fittingly epitomize the history of his public life. "Martial de Sairmeuse," says the writer, "placed at the service of his party a highly cultivated intellect, unusual penetration, and extraordinary abilities. A leader at the time when political passion was raging highest, he had the courage to assume the sole responsibility of the most unpopular measures. But the hostility he encountered, the danger in which he placed the throne, compelled him to retire from office, leaving behind him animosities which will only be extinguished with his life." In thus summing up Martial's public career, his biographer omits to say that if the Duc de Sairmeuse was wrong in his policy—and that depends entirely on the point of view from which his conduct is regarded—he was doubly wrong, since he was not possessed of that ardent conviction verging on fanaticism which makes men fools, heroes, and martyrs. He was not even truly ambitious. When those associated with him wit-

nessed his passionate struggles and unceasing activity, they thought him actuated by an insatiable thirst for power. But, in reality, he cared little or nothing for it. He considered its burdens heavy; its compensations slight. His pride was too lofty to feel any satisfaction in applause; and flattery disgusted him. Often, during some brilliant fete, his acquaintances and subordinates, finding him thoughtful and pre-occupied, respectfully refrained from disturbing him. "His mind is occupied with momentous questions," they fancied. "Who can tell what important decisions may result from his reverie?" But in this surmise they were mistaken. And indeed, at that very moment when royal favor filled his rivals' hearts with envy, when occupying the highest position a subject can aspire to, and it seemed he could have nothing left to wish for in this world, Martial was saying to himself: "What an empty life! What weariness and vexation of spirit! To live for others—what a mockery!"

He looked at his wife, radiant in her beauty, worshiped like a queen, and sighed. He thought of her who was dead—Marie-Anne—the only woman he had ever loved. She was never absent from his mind, and after all these years he saw her yet, stretched cold, rigid, lifeless, on the canopied bedstead, in that luxurious room at the Borderie. Time, far from effacing from his heart the image of the fair girl whose beauty unwittingly had wrought such wo—had only intensified youthful impressions, endowing the lost idol with almost super-human grace of person and character. Ah! if fate had but given him Marie-Anne for his wife! Thus said Martial, again and again, picturing the happiness which then would have been his. They would have remained at Sairmeuse. They would have had children playing round them! And he would not be condemned to this continual warfare—to this hollow, unsatisfying, restless life. The truly happy are not those who parade their dignities and opulence before the eyes of the multitude. They rather hide themselves from the curious gaze, and they are right; for here on earth happiness is almost a crime. So thought Martial; and he, the envied statesman, often said to himself, with a feeling of vexation: "To love, and to be loved—that is everything! All else is vanity."

He had really tried to love his wife; he had done his best to resuscitate the feeling of admiration with which she had

inspired him at their first meeting; but he had not succeeded. It seemed as if there was between them a wall of ice which nothing could melt, and which only grew and expanded as time went on. "Why is it?" he wondered, again and again. "It is incomprehensible. There are days when I could swear she loves me. Her character, formerly so irritable, is entirely changed; she is gentleness itself." But still he could not conquer his aversion; it was stronger than his own will.

These unavailing regrets, the disappointment and sorrow that preyed upon his mind, undoubtedly aggravated the bitterness and severity of Martial's policy. At least he knew how to fall nobly. He passed, even without a change of countenance, from all but omnipotence to a position so compromising that his very life was endangered. On perceiving his antechambers, formerly thronged with flatterers and place-hunters, now empty and deserted, he laughed—naturally, sincerely, without the least affectation. "The ship is sinking," said he; "the rats have deserted it." He did not even turn pale when the mob gathered outside his house, hurling stones at his windows, and hooting and cursing the fallen statesman; and when Otto, his faithful valet de chambre, entreated him to assume a disguise, and make his escape through the gardens, he quietly replied: "By no means! I am simply odious; I don't wish to become ridiculous!" They could not even dissuade him from going to a window and looking down on the rabble in the street below. A singular idea had just occurred to him. "If Jean Lacheneur is still alive," he thought, "how much he would enjoy this! And if he is alive, no doubt he is there in the foremost rank, urging on the crowd." And he wished to see. But Jean Lacheneur was in Russia at that epoch.

The excitement eventually subsided; and the Hotel de Sairmeuse was not seriously threatened. However, Martial realized that it would be better for him to go away for a while, and allow people to forget him. He did not ask the duchess to accompany him. "The fault has been mine entirely," he said to her, "and it would be most unjust to make you suffer for it by condemning you to exile. Remain here; I think it will be much better for you to remain." She did not offer to go with him, although she longed to do so, but then she dared not leave Paris. She knew that she must remain in order to secure her persecutor's silence. On the two occasions when she had left Paris before, everything was near

being discovered, and yet then she had had Aunt Medea to take her place. Martial went away, accompanied only by his servant, Otto. In intelligence, this man was decidedly superior to his position; he was indeed decently well-off, and he had a hundred reasons—one, by the way, was a very pretty one—for desiring to remain in Paris; but his master was in trouble, and so he did not hesitate. During four years the Duc de Sairmeuse wandered through Europe, always chafing beneath the burden of a life no longer animated by interest or sustained by hope. He remained for a time in London, then he went to Vienna, and afterward to Venice. One day he was seized by an irresistible desire to see Paris again, and he returned. It was not a very prudent step, perhaps, for his bitterest enemies—personal enemies, whom he had mortally offended and persecuted—were in power; but still he did not hesitate. Besides, how could they injure him, since he had no favors to ask, no cravings of ambition to satisfy?

The exile which had weighed so heavily on him, the loneliness he had endured, had softened his nature and inclined his heart to tenderness; and he returned firmly resolved to overcome his aversion to his wife, and seek a reconciliation. "Old age is coming," he thought. "If I have not the love of youth by my fireside, I may at least have a friend." Blanche was astonished by his manner toward her when he returned. She almost believed she had found again the Martial of the old days at Courtoirieu, but the realization of the dream, so fondly cherished and so long deferred, now proved only another torture added to all the others. Still, Martial was striving to carry his plan into execution, when one day the following brief note came to him through the post: "Monsieur le Duc—If I were in your place, I would watch my wife."

It was only an anonymous letter, and yet on perusing it Martial's blood mounted to his forehead. "Can she have a lover?" he thought. Then reflecting on his own conduct toward his wife since their marriage, he said to himself: "And if she has, what right have I to complain? Did I not tacitly give her back her liberty?" However, he was greatly troubled; and yet he did not once think of playing the spy.

A few mornings afterward, at about eleven o'clock, he was returning from a ride on horseback, and was not thirty paces from the Hotel de Sairmeuse when he suddenly perceived a lady hurriedly emerge from the house. She was very plainly

dressed—entirely in black—but her whole appearance recalled that of the duchess in a striking fashion. "That's certainly my wife," thought Martial, "but why is she dressed in that fashion?" Then, yielding to a sudden impulse, he walked his horse up the Rue de Grenelle behind the woman in black. Blanche it was. She was tripping swiftly over the pavement, keeping her face shrouded by a thick veil, and she never once turned her head. On reaching the Rue Taranne, she spoke hurriedly to a cab-driver on the stand, and then sprang into his vehicle. The Jehu was already on his box, and he at once gave his bony horse such a vigorous cut of the whip that it was evident he had just been promised a princely gratuity. The cab had already turned into the Rue du Dragon, and Martial, ashamed of what he had already done and irresolute as to what he should do now, was still tarrying at the corner of the Rue des Saint-Peres, where he had originally stopped his horse. Scarcely daring to entertain the suspicions that flitted across his mind, he tried to deceive himself. "After all," he muttered, "it is of no use advancing. The cab's a long way off by now, and I couldn't overtake it." Still he mechanically gave his horse the rein, and when he reached the Croix Rouge he espied Blanche's vehicle among a crowd of others. He recognized it by its green body and wheels striped with white. This decided him. The cab-driver had just managed to extricate himself from the block which traffic so frequently causes hereabout, and whipping up his horse once more turned literally at a gallop up the Rue du Vieux Colombier—leading into the Place St. Sulpice. Thence he took the shortest cut to gain the outer boulevards.

Martial's thoughts were busy as he trotted along a hundred yards or so behind the vehicle. "She's in a terrible hurry," he said to himself. "But this is scarcely the quarter for a lover's rendezvous." The cab had indeed now reached the squalid region extending beyond the Place d'Italie. It turned into the Rue du Chateau des Rentiers and soon drew up before a tract of waste ground. The Duchesse de Sairmeuse then hastily alighted, and, without stopping to look to the right or to the left, hurried across the open space. Martial had prudently paused in the rear. Not far from him he espied a man sitting on a block of stone and apparently immersed in the task of coloring a clay pipe. "Will you hold my horse a moment?" inquired Martial.

"Certainly," answered the man, rising to his feet. He wore a workman's blouse and a long beard, and his aspect altogether was scarcely prepossessing. Had Martial been less preoccupied, his suspicions might have been aroused by the malicious smile that curved the fellow's lips; and had he scrutinized him closely, he would perhaps have recognized him. For the seeming vagrant was Jean Lacheneur. Since forwarding that anonymous letter to the Duc de Sairmeuse, he had compelled the duchess to multiply her visits to the Widow Chupin's den, and on each occasion he had watched for her arrival. "So, if her husband decides to follow her I shall know it," he thought. It was indispensable for the success of his plans that Blanche should be watched by her husband. For from among a thousand schemes of revenge, Jean had chosen the most frightful his fevered brain could conceive. He longed to see the haughty Duchesse de Sairmeuse subjected to the vilest ignominy, and Martial in the hands of the lowest of the low. He pictured a bloody struggle in this miserable den; the sudden arrival of the police, summoned by himself, and the indiscriminate arrest of all the parties present. He gloated over the thought of a trial in which the crime committed at the Borderie would be brought to light; he saw the duke and the duchess in prison, and the great names of Sairmeuse and Courtornieu shrouded in eternal disgrace. And he believed that nothing was wanting to insure the success of his plans. He had two miserable wretches who were capable of any crime at his disposal; and an unfortunate youth named Gustave, whom poverty and cowardice had made his willing slave, was intended to play the part of Marie-Anne's son. These three accomplices had no suspicions of Lacheneur's real intentions, while, as for the Widow Chupin and her son, if they suspected some infamous plot, all they really knew in regard to it was the duchess's name. Moreover, Jean held Polyte and his mother completely under his control by the wealth he had promised them if they served him faithfully. If Martial decided to follow his wife into the Poivriere the first time he watched her, Jean had, moreover, so arranged matters that the duke would at first suppose that Blanche had been led there by charity. "But he will not go in," thought the seeming vagrant, as, holding Martial's horse some little distance off, he looked in the direction of the hovel. "Monsieur le Duc is too cunning for that."

And Martial did not go in. Though he was horrified when



he saw his wife enter so vile a den, as if she were at home there, he said to himself that he should learn nothing by following her. He, therefore, contented himself by making a thorough examination of the hovel from outside, and then remounting his horse, and throwing Lachenear a silver coin, he started back home at a gallop. He was completely mystified: he did not know what to think, what to imagine, what to believe. But, at the same time, he was fully resolved to fathom the mystery; and as soon as he returned home he sent Otto out in search of information. He could confide everything to this devoted servant from whom he had no secrets. At four o'clock in the afternoon the faithful valet de chambre returned with an expression of consternation on his face. "What is it?" asked Martial, divining some great misfortune.

"Ah, sir, the mistress of that wretched den is the widow of Chupin's son—"

Martial's face turned ghastly pale. He knew life well enough to understand that since the duchess had been compelled to submit to these people's power, they must be masters of some secret which she was anxious at any price to keep unrevealed. But what secret could it be? The years which had furrowed Martial's brow had not cooled the ardor of his blood. He was, as he had always been, a man of impulse, and so, without pausing, he rushed to his wife's apartments.

"Madame has just gone downstairs to receive the Comtesse de Mussidan and the Marquise d'Arlange," said the maid whom he met on the landing.

"Very well; I will wait for her here. You may retire."

So saying, Martial entered Blanche's dressing-room. It was in disorder, for, after returning from the Poivriere, the duchess was still engaged at her toilet when visitors were announced. The wardrobe doors stood open, two or three chairs were encumbered with wearing apparel, and Blanche's watch, her purse, and several bunches of keys were lying on the dressing table and the mantelpiece. Martial did not sit down. His self-possession was returning. "I will commit no act of folly," he thought; "if I question her, I shall learn nothing. I must be silent and watchful."

He was about to retire, when, on glancing round the room, he noticed a large casket, inlaid with silver, which had belonged to his wife ever since she was a girl, and which accompanied her everywhere. "That, no doubt, contains the solution of the

mystery," he said to himself. This was one of those moments when a man obeys the dictates of passion without pausing to reflect. Seeing the keys on the mantelpiece, he seized them, and endeavored to find one that would fit the lock of the casket. The fourth key opened it. It was full of papers. With feverish haste, Martial examined their contents. He had thrown aside several unimportant letters, when he came to a bill that read as follows: "Search made for Madame de Sairmeuse's child. Expenses for the third quarter of the year 18—." Martial's brain reeled. A child! His wife had a child! But he read on: "For the services of two agents at Sairmeuse, ——. For expenses attending my own journey, ——. Divers gratuities, ——. Etc., etc." The total amounted to six thousand francs; and it was receipted "Chefteux." With a sort of cold rage, Martial continued his examination of the casket's contents, and found a miserably written note, which said: "Two thousand francs this evening, or I will tell the duke the history of the affair at the Borderie." Then there were several more of Chefteux's bills; next, a letter from Aunt Medea, in which she spoke of prison and remorse; and, finally, at the bottom of the casket, he found the marriage certificate of Marie-Anne Lacheneur and Maurice d'Escorval, drawn up by the cure of Vigano and signed by the old physician and Corporal Bavois.

The truth was as clear as daylight. Stunned, frozen with horror, Martial scarcely had strength enough to place the letters in the casket again and restore it to its place. Then he tottered back to his own room, clinging to the walls for support. "It was she who murdered Marie-Anne," he murmured. He was confounded, terror-stricken, by the perfidy of this woman who was his wife—by her criminal audacity, cool calculation and assurance, and her marvelous powers of dissimulation.

Still he swore he would discover everything, either through the duchess or through the Widow Chupin; and he ordered Otto to procure him a costume such as was generally worn by the frequenters of the Poivriere. He did not know how soon he might have need of it. This happened early in February, and from that moment Blanche did not take a single step without being watched. Not a letter reached her that her husband had not previously read. And she had not the slightest suspicion of the constant supervision to which she was subjected. Martial did not leave his room; he pretended to be ill.

He felt he could not meet his wife and remain silent. He remembered the oath of vengeance which he had sworn over Marie-Anne's lifeless form only too well. However, the watch which Otto kept over the duchess, and the perusal of the letters addressed to her, did not yield any fresh information, and for this reason: Polyte Chupin had been arrested on a charge of theft, and this accident caused a delay in the execution of Lacheneur's plans.

But at last the latter prepared everything for Shrove Sunday, the 20th of February. On the previous day, in accordance with her instructions, the Widow Chupin wrote to the duchess that she must come to the Poivriere on Sunday night at eleven o'clock. On that same evening Jean was to meet his accomplices at a ball at the Rainbow—a wine-shop bearing a very unenviable reputation—and give them their final instructions. These accomplices were to open the scene; he was only to appear at the *denouement*. "All is well arranged; the mechanism will work of its own accord," he said to himself. But, as is already known, the "mechanism," as he styled it, failed to act.

On receiving the Widow Chupin's summons, Blanche revolted for a moment. The lateness of the hour, the distance, the isolation of the appointed meeting-place, frightened her. Still, she was obliged to submit, and on Sunday evening she furtively left the house, accompanied by Camille, the same maid who had been present when Aunt Medea died. The duchess and Camille were attired like women of the lowest order, and felt no fear of being recognized. And yet a man was watching who quickly followed them. This was Martial. He had perused the note appointing this rendezvous even before his wife, and had disguised himself in the costume Otto had procured for him—that of a laborer about the quays. Then, in hope of making himself absolutely unrecognizable, he had soiled and matted his hair and beard; his hands were grimed with dirt; and he really seemed to belong to the class of which he wore the attire. Otto had begged to be allowed to accompany his master; but the duke refused, remarking that his revolver would prove quite sufficient protection. He knew Otto well enough, however, to feel certain he would disobey him.

Ten o'clock was striking when Blanche and Camille left the house, and it did not take them five minutes to reach the Rue Taranne. There was only one cab on the stand, which they at once hired. This circumstance drew from Martial an oath

worthy of his costume. But he reflected that, since he knew where to find his wife, a slight delay in obtaining a vehicle would not matter. He soon found one, and, thanks to a gratuity of ten francs, the driver started off to the Rue du Chateau-des-Rentiers as fast as his horse could go. However, the duke had scarcely alighted before he heard the rumbling of another vehicle, which pulled up abruptly a little distance behind. "Otto is evidently following me," he thought. And he then started across the open space in the direction of the Poivriere. The prevailing silence and absence of life were rendered still more oppressive by a chill fog which heralded an approaching thaw. Martial stumbled and slipped at almost every step he took over the rough, snow-covered ground; but at last through the mist he distinguished a building in the distance. This was the Poivriere. The light burning inside filtered through the heart-shaped apertures cut in the upper part of the shutters, and it almost seemed as if a pair of lurid eyes were striving to peer through the fog.

Could it really be possible that the Duchesse de Sairmeuse was there! Martial cautiously approached the window, and, clinging to the hinges of the shutters, raised himself up so that he could glance through one of the apertures. Yes, there was no mistake. His wife and Camille were seated at a table before a large punch-bowl, in the company of two ragged, leering scoundrels, and a soldier of youthful appearance. In the centre of the room stood the Widow Chupin, with a small glass in her hand. She was talking with great volubility, and punctuating her sentences with occasional sips of brandy. The impression this scene produced on Martial was so acute that his hold relaxed and he dropped to the ground. A ray of pity stole into his soul, for he vaguely realized the frightful suffering which had been the murderess's chastisement. But he wished for another glance, and so once more he lifted himself up to the opening and looked in. The old woman had disappeared; the young soldier had risen from the table, and was talking and gesticulating earnestly. Blanche and Camille were listening to him with the closest attention. The two men who were sitting face to face, with their elbows on the table, were looking at each other; and Martial saw them exchange a significant glance. He was not wrong. The scoundrels were plotting "a rich haul." Blanche, who had dressed herself with much care, and to render her disguise perfect had encased her

feet in large, coarse shoes, that were causing her well-nigh intolerable agony—Blanche had neglected to remove her superb diamond earrings. She had forgotten them, but Lacheneur's accomplices had noticed them, and were now glancing at them with eyes that glittered more brilliantly than the diamonds themselves. While awaiting Lacheneur's coming, these wretches, as had been agreed upon, were playing the part which he had imposed upon them. For this and their assistance afterward they were to receive a certain sum of money. But they were thinking that this sum did not represent a quarter of the value of these jewels, and their looks only too plainly said: "What if we could secure them and go off before Lacheneur comes!" The temptation was too strong to be resisted. One of the scoundrels suddenly rose, and seizing the duchess by the back of the neck, forced her head down on the table. The diamonds would have been at once torn from her ears if it had not been for Camille, who bravely came to her mistress's assistance. Martial could endure no more. He sprang to the door of the hovel, opened it, and entered, bolting it behind him.

"Martial!" "Monsieur le Duc!" cried Blanche and Camille in the same breath, for, despite his disguise, they had both recognized him. Their exclamations turned the momentary stupor of their assailants into fury; and both ruffians precipitated themselves on Martial, determined to kill him. But, springing to one side, the duke avoided them. He had his revolver in his hand; he fired twice, and both the scoundrels fell. However, he was not yet safe, for the young soldier rushed forward and attempted to disarm him. Then began a furious struggle, in the midst of which Martial did not leave off crying, in a panting voice, "Fly! Blanche, fly! Otto is not far off. The name—save the honor of the name!"

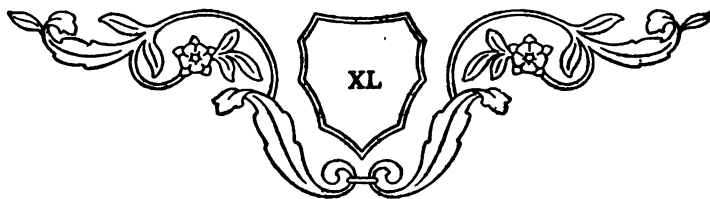
The two women obeyed him, making their escape through the back door, which opened into the garden; and they had scarcely done so before a violent knocking was heard at the front entry. The police were coming! This increased Martial's frenzy; and in a supreme effort to free himself from his assailant, he hurled him backward so violently that, striking his head against a corner of the table, the young soldier fell on to the floor, and lay there to all appearance dead. In the mean while, the Widow Chupin, who had hastened from the room above on hearing the uproar, was shrieking on the staircase, while at the front door a voice was crying: "Open

in the name of the law!" Martial might have fled; but if he fled the duchess might be captured, for he would certainly be pursued. He saw the peril at a glance, and determined to remain. Shaking the Widow Chupin by the arm, he said to her in an imperious voice: "If you know how to hold your tongue you shall have a hundred thousand francs." Then, drawing a table before the door opening into the back room, he intrenched himself behind it as a rampart, and awaited the enemy's approach.

The next moment the door was forced open, and a squad of police agents, headed by Inspector Gevrol, entered the room. "Surrender!" cried the inspector.

Martial did not move; his revolver was turned toward the intruders. "If I can parley with them and hold them in check only two minutes, all may yet be saved," he thought. He obtained the required delay; then throwing his weapon to the ground, he was about to bound through the back door when a police agent, who had gone round to the rear of the house, seized him about the body and threw him to the floor. From this side he expected only assistance, hence he exclaimed: "Lost! It is the Prussians who are coming!"

In the twinkling of an eye he was bound; and two hours later he was an inmate of the station-house at the Place d'Italie. He had played his part so perfectly that he had deceived even Gevrol. His assailants were dead, and he could rely upon the Widow Chupin. But he knew that the trap had been set for him by Jean Lacheneur; and he read a whole volume of suspicion in the eyes of the young officer who had cut off his retreat, and who was called Lecoq by his companions.



**T**HE Duc de Sairmeuse was one of those men who remain superior to circumstances. He was possessed of vast experience and great natural shrewdness. His mind was quick to act and fertile in resources. But when he found himself immured in the damp and loathsome station-house at the Place

d'Italie, after the terrible scene we have just recalled, he felt inclined to relinquish all hope. He knew that justice does not trust to appearances, and that when an investigating magistrate finds himself in the presence of a mystery, he does not rest until he has fathomed it. He knew only too well, moreover, that if his identity were established the authorities would endeavor to discover the reason that had led him to the Poivriere; now he could scarcely doubt but what this reason would soon be discovered, and in that case the crime at the Borderie, and the duchess's guilt, would undoubtedly be made public. This meant the Assize Court for the woman who bore his name—imprisonment, perhaps execution; at all events, a frightful scandal, dishonor, eternal disgrace! And the power he had wielded in former days was a positive disadvantage to him now, when his past position was filled by his political adversaries. Among them were two personal enemies, whose vanity he once had wounded, and who had never forgiven him. They would certainly not neglect the present opportunity for revenge. At the thought of such an ineffaceable stain on the great name of Sairmeuse, which was his pride and glory, reason almost forsook him. "My God, inspire me," he murmured. "How shall I save the honor of the name?"

He saw but one chance of salvation—death. They now believed him to be one of the miserable loafers who haunt the suburbs of Paris; if he were dead they would not trouble themselves about his identity. "It is the only way!" he thought, and he was indeed endeavoring to find some means of committing suicide when suddenly he heard a bustle outside his cell. A few moments afterward the door was opened and a man was thrust in—a man who staggered a few steps, fell heavily on to the floor, and then began to snore. The new arrival was apparently only some vulgar drunkard.

A minute or so elapsed, and then a vague, strange hope touched Martial's heart—no, he must be mistaken—and yet—yes, certainly this drunkard was Otto—Otto in disguise, and almost unrecognizable! It was a bold ruse and no time must be lost in profiting by it. Martial stretched himself on a bench, as if to sleep, and in such a way that his head was close to Otto's. "The duchess is out of danger," murmured the faithful servant.

"For to-day, perhaps. But to-morrow, through me, everything will be discovered."

"Have you told them who you are?"

"No; all the police agents but one took me for a vagabond."

"You must continue to personate that character."

"What good will it do? Jean Lacheneur will betray me."

But Martial, though he little knew it, had no need to fear Lacheneur for the present, at least. A few hours previously, on his way in the dark from the Rainbow to the Poivriere, Jean had fallen to the bottom of a stone quarry, and fractured his skull. The laborers, on returning to their work early in the morning, found him lying there senseless; and that very moment they were carrying him to the hospital.

Although Otto also was ignorant of this circumstance, he did not seem discouraged. "There will be some way of getting rid of Lacheneur," said he, "if you will only sustain your present character. An escape is an easy matter when a man has millions at his command."

"They will ask me who I am, where I've come from, and how I've lived."

"You speak English and German, don't you? Tell them that you have just returned from foreign parts; that you were a foundling, and that you have always lived a roving life."

"How can I prove that?"

Otto drew a little nearer his master, and said, impressively: "We must agree on our plans, for success depends on a perfect understanding between us. I have a sweetheart in Paris—and no one knows of our connection. She is as sharp as steel. Her name is Milner, and she keeps the Hotel de Mariembourg, in the Rue Saint-Quentin. You can say that you arrived here from Leipsic on Sunday; that you went to that hotel, that you left your trunk there, and that it has a card nailed to the top with your name—say May, foreign artist."

"Capital!" said Martial, approvingly. And then, with extraordinary quickness and precision, they agreed, point by point, on their plan of defense. When everything had been arranged, Otto pretended to awake from the heavy sleep of intoxication; he clamored to be released, and the keeper finally opened the door and set him at liberty. Before leaving the station-house, however, he succeeded in throwing a note to the Widow Chupin, who was imprisoned in the opposite cell. So, when Lecoq, after his skilful investigations at the Poivriere, rushed to the Place d'Italie, panting with hope and ambition, he found himself outwitted by these men, who were inferior to him in penetration, but whose tact was superior to his own.



Martial's plans being fully formed, he intended to carry them out with absolute perfection of detail, and, after his removal to the Depot, he was preparing himself for the investigating magistrate's visit, when Maurice d'Escorval entered his cell. They recognized each other. They were both terribly agitated, and the examination was an examination only in name. After Maurice's departure Martial attempted to destroy himself; for he had no faith in his former enemy's generosity. But when he found M. Segmuller occupying Maurice's place the next morning, he really believed that he was saved.

Then began that struggle between the magistrate and Lecoq on one side, and the prisoner on the other—a struggle in which neither conquered. Martial knew that Lecoq was the only person he had to fear, still he bore him no ill-will. Faithful to his nature, which compelled him to be just even to his enemies, he could not help admiring the astonishing penetration and perseverance of this young police agent, who, undismayed by the obstacles surrounding him, struggled on, unassisted, to reach the truth. But Lecoq was always outwitted by Otto, the mysterious accomplice, who seemed to know his every movement in advance. At the Morgue, at the Hotel de Mariembourg, with Toinon, the wife of Polyte Chupin, as well as with Polyte himself, Lecoq was always just a little too late. He detected the secret correspondence between the prisoner and his accomplice, and he was even ingenious enough to discover the key to it, but this served no purpose. A man, who had seen a rival, or rather a future master, in Lecoq—in short, Gevrol—had betrayed him. If his efforts to arrive at the truth through the jeweler and the Marquise d'Arlange had failed, it was only because Blanche had not purchased the diamond earrings she wore at the Poivriere at any shop, but from one of her friends, the Baroness de Watchau. And finally, if no one in Paris had missed the Duc de Sairmeuse, it was because—thanks to an understanding between the duchess, Otto, and Camille—no other inmates of the Hotel de Sairmeuse suspected his absence. All the servants supposed that the duke was confined to his room by illness. His breakfast and dinner were taken up to his private apartments every day; and soups and tisanes were prepared ostensibly for his benefit.

So the weeks went by, and Martial was expecting to be summoned before the Assize Court and condemned under the name of May, when he was afforded an opportunity to escape. Too

shrewd not to discern the trap that had been set for him, it was only after horrible hesitation that he decided to alight from the prison-van, determined to run the risk, and commending himself for protection to his lucky star. And he decided wisely, for that same night he leaped over his own garden wall, leaving an escaped convict, Joseph Couturier by name, whom he had picked up in a low eating-house, as a hostage in Lecoq's hands. Warned by Madame Milner, thanks to a blunder which Lecoq committed, Otto was waiting for his master. In the twinkling of an eye Martial's beard fell under the razor; he plunged into the bath which was already prepared, and his clothes were burned. And he it was who, during the search a few minutes later, had the hardihood to call out: "Otto, by all means allow these men to do their duty." But he did not breathe freely until the police agents had departed. "At last," he exclaimed, "honor is saved! We have outwitted Lecoq!"

He had just left his bath, and assumed a dressing-gown, when Otto handed him a letter from the duchess. He hastily opened the envelope and read: "You are safe. You know everything. I am dying. Farewell. I loved you."

With two bounds he reached his wife's apartments. The outer door was locked: he burst it open; but he came too late. Blanche was dead—poisoned, like Marie-Anne; but she had procured a drug having an instantaneous effect, and extended on her couch, clad in her wonted apparel, her hands folded over her breast, she seemed only asleep. A tear glistened in Martial's eye. "Poor, unhappy woman!" he murmured; "may God forgive you as I forgive you—you whose crime has been so frightfully expiated here below!"



**S**AFE, in his own princely mansion, and surrounded by an army of retainers, the Duc de Sairmeuse had triumphantly exclaimed: "We have outwitted Lecoq!"

In this he was right; for the young detective was certainly nonplused for the time being; but when his grace fancied him-

self forever beyond this wily, keen-witted, aspiring agent's reach, he was most decidedly wrong. Lecoq was not the man to sit down with folded hands and brood over the humiliation of defeat. Before he went to old Tabaret, he was beginning to recover from his despondency; and when he left that experienced detective's presence, he had regained his courage, energy, and command over his faculties. "Well, my worthy friend," he remarked to Father Absinthe, who was trotting along by his side, "you heard what the great Monsieur Tabaret said, didn't you? So, you see, I was right."

But his companion evinced no enthusiasm. "Yes, you were right," he responded, in woe-gone tones.

"Do you think we are ruined by two or three mistakes? Nonsense! I will soon turn to-day's defeat into a glorious victory."

"Ah! you might do so perhaps, if—they don't dismiss us from the force."

This doleful remark recalled Lecoq to a sense of his present position. He and Absinthe had allowed a prisoner to slip through their fingers. That was vexatious, it is true; but, on the other hand, they had captured a most notorious criminal—Joseph Couturier. Surely there was some comfort in that. Still, of course, they both might be dismissed—and yet Lecoq could have borne the prospect, dismal as it was, if it had not been for the thought that dismissal would forever prevent him from following up the Poivriere affair. What would his superiors say when he told them that May and the Duc de Sairmeuse were one and the same person. They would, no doubt, shrug their shoulders and turn up their noses. "Still, M. Segmuller will believe me," he thought. "But will he dare to take any action in the matter without plain evidence before him?"

This was very unlikely, as Lecoq fully realized, and for a moment he asked himself if he and his fellows could not make a descent on the Hotel de Sairmeuse, and, on some pretext or other, compel the duke to show himself. It would then be easy to identify him as the prisoner May. However, after a little thought he dismissed the idea. "It would be a stupid expedient!" he exclaimed. "Two such men as the duke and his accomplice are not likely to be caught napping. They are prepared for such a visit, and we should only have our labor for our pains."

He made these reflections in a low tone of voice; and Father

Absinthe's curiosity was aroused. "Excuse me," said the old veteran, "I don't quite understand you."

"I say that we must find some tangible proof before asking permission to proceed further—" Lecoq paused with knitted brows. An idea had occurred to him. He fancied he could prove complicity between at least one of the witnesses summoned to give evidence, and some member of the duke's household. He was indeed thinking of Madame Milner, the landlady of the Hotel de Mariembourg, and of his first meeting with her. He saw her again, in his mind's eye, standing on a chair, her face on a level with a cage, covered with a large piece of black silk, while she persistently repeated three or four German words to a starling, who with equal persistency retorted: "Camille! Where is Camille?" "One thing is certain," exclaimed Lecoq aloud, "if Madame Milner—who is a German, and who speaks French with the strongest possible German accent—had reared this bird, it would either have spoken in German or else in French, and in the latter case with the same accent as its mistress. So it can't have been in her possession long; but then who can have given it to her?"

"Father Absinthe was beginning to grow impatient. "In sober earnest, what are you talking about?" he asked, petulantly.

"I say that if there is any one at the Hotel de Sairmeuse named Camille, I have the proof I wish for. Come, Papa Absinthe, let us hurry on." And without another word of explanation, he dragged his companion rapidly toward the Seine.

When they reached the Rue de Grenelle, Lecoq perceived a commissionaire leaning against the door of a wine-shop. He walked straight toward him. "Come, my good fellow," said he. "I want you to go to the Hotel de Sairmeuse and ask for Camille. Tell her that her uncle is waiting for her here."

"But, sir—"

"What, you haven't gone yet?"

The messenger started off, and the two police agents entered the wine-shop, Father Absinthe scarcely having time to swallow a glass of brandy before the envoy returned. "I was unable to see Mademoiselle Camille," said he. "The house is closed from top to bottom. The duchess died very suddenly this morning."

"Ah! the wretch!" exclaimed the young police agent. Then controlling himself, he mentally added: "He must have killed

his wife on returning home, but his fate is sealed. Now, I shall be allowed to continue my investigations."

In less than twenty minutes they arrived at the Palais de Justice. M. Segmuller did not seem to be immoderately surprised by Lecoq's revelations, though he listened with evident doubt to the young police agent's ingenious deductions; it was the circumstance of the startling which at last decided him. "Perhaps you are right, my dear Lecoq," he said, "and to tell the truth, I quite agree with you. But I can take no further action in the matter until you can furnish proof so convincing in its nature that the Duc de Sairmeuse will be unable to think of denying it."

"Ah! my superiors won't allow me—"

"On the contrary," interrupted the magistrate, "they will allow you the fullest liberty after I have spoken to them." Such action on M. Segmuller's part required no little courage; for in official circles there had been considerable merriment over the magistrate's mysterious man with the iron mask, disguised as a mountebank; and the former by his persistent support of the young detective's theories had almost become an object of ridicule.

"And when will you speak to them?" timidly inquired Lecoq.

"At once."

The magistrate had already turned toward the door when the young police agent stopped him. "I have one more favor to ask you, sir," he said, entreatingly. "You are so kind, you are the first person who has given me any encouragement—who has had any faith in me."

"Speak, my good fellow."

"Ah! sir, will you give me a message for M. d'Escorval? Any insignificant message—inform him of the prisoner's escape. I will take it myself, and then— Oh! fear nothing, sir; I will be very prudent."

"Very well!" replied the magistrate, "I will write him a note."

When he finally left the office, Lecoq was fully authorized to proceed with his investigations, and he carried in his pocket M. Segmuller's letter to M. d'Escorval. His satisfaction was so intense that he did not deign to notice the sneers bestowed upon him as he passed along the corridors; but on the threshold downstairs he encountered Gevrol, the general, who was evidently watching for him. "Ah, ha!" laughed the inspector,

as Lecoq passed out, "here's one of those simpletons who fish for whales and don't even catch a gudgeon."

For an instant Lecoq felt angry. He turned round abruptly and looked Gevrol full in the face. "At all events," retorted he in the tone of a man who knows what he's saying, "that's better than assisting prisoners to carry on a surreptitious correspondence with people outside."

In his surprise, Gevrol almost lost countenance, and his blush was equivalent to a confession. But Lecoq did not add another word. What did it matter to him now if Gevrol had betrayed him! Was he not about to win a glorious revenge!

He spent the remainder of the day in preparing his plan of action, and in thinking what he should say when he took M. Segmuller's note to Maurice d'Escorval. The next morning, at about eleven o'clock, he presented himself at the latter's house. "M. d'Escorval is in his study with a young man," replied the servant to the young detective's inquiry, "but, as he gave me no orders to the contrary, you may go in."

Lecoq entered, but found the study unoccupied. From the adjoining room, however, only separated from the study by velvet hangings, came a sound of stifled exclamations, of sobs mingled with kisses. Not knowing whether to remain or to retire, the young police agent stood for a moment undecided; when suddenly he perceived an open letter lying on the carpet. Impelled by an impulse stronger than his will, Lecoq picked the letter up, and his eyes meeting the signature, he started back in surprise. He could not now refrain from reading this missive, which ran as follows:

"The bearer of this letter is Marie-Anne's son—your son, Maurice. I have given him all the proofs necessary to establish his identity. It was to his education that I consecrated poor Marie-Anne's inheritance. Those to whose care I confided him have made a noble man of him. If I restore him to you, it is only because the life I lead is not a fitting life for him. Yesterday, the miserable woman who murdered my sister died from poison administered by her own hand. Poor Marie-Anne! she would have been far more terribly avenged had not an accident which happened to me saved the Duc and the Duchesse de Sairmeuse from the snare into which I had drawn them.

JEAN LACHENEUR."

Lecoq stood as if petrified. Now he understood the terrible drama enacted in the Widow Chupin's cabin. "I must go to Sairmeuse at once," he said to himself; "there I can discover everything." He left the room without seeing M. d'Escorval, and even successfully resisted the temptation to take Lacheneur's letter with him.

Exactly a month had transpired since Blanche's death. His grace the Duc de Sairmeuse was reclining on a divan in his library, reading one of his favorite authors, when Otto, his valet de chambre, came in to inform him that a messenger was below, charged with delivering into his grace's own hands a letter from M. d'Escorval.

Martial sprang to his feet. "It is impossible," he exclaimed; and then he quickly added: "Let the messenger come up."

A tall man, with florid complexion, and red hair and beard, timidly handed the duke a letter. Martial instantly broke the seal, and read:

"I saved you, monsieur, by not recognizing the prisoner, May. In your turn assist me. By noon on the day after to-morrow, I must have two hundred and sixty thousand francs. I have sufficient confidence in your honor to apply to you.

"MAURICE D'ESCORVAL."

For a moment Martial stood bewildered, then springing to a table he began writing, without noticing that the messenger was looking over his shoulder: "Monsieur—Not the day after to-morrow, but this evening, what you ask will be at your service. My fortune and my life are at your disposal. It is but a slight return for the generosity shown by you in withdrawing, when, under the rags of May, you recognized your former enemy, but now your devoted friend.

"MARTIAL DE SAIRMEUSE."

The duke folded this letter with a feverish hand, and giving it to the messenger with a louis, he said: "Here is the answer, make haste!"

But the messenger did not stir. He slipped the letter into his pocket, and then hastily cast his red beard and wig on the floor.

"Lecoq!" exclaimed Martial, paler than death.

"Lecoq, yes, sir," replied the young detective. "I was obliged

to take my revenge; my future depended on it, and so I ventured to imitate M. d'Escorval's writing." And as Martial offered no remark: "I must also say to Monsieur le Duc," he continued, "that if your grace will transmit a confession of your presence at the Poivriere in your own handwriting to the investigating magistrate I can and will at the same time furnish proofs of your grace's innocence—that you were dragged into a snare, and that you only acted in self-defense."

Martial looked up in fair astonishment, but to show that he was acquainted with everything, Lecoq slowly added: "As madame is dead, there will be nothing said concerning what took place at the Borderie."

A week later a private report setting forth that there were no grounds to proceed against the Duc de Sairmeuse was forwarded by M. Segmuller to the public prosecutor.

Appointed to the position of inspector, which he coveted, Lecoq had the good taste, or perhaps, the shrewdness, to wear his honors modestly. But on the day of his promotion, he ordered a seal, on which was engraved the exultant rooster, his chosen armorial design, with a motto to which he ever remained faithful: "*Semper Vigilans*."

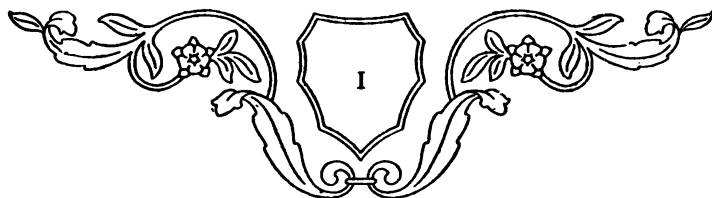
THE END





## THE LEROUGE AFFAIR





## THE LEROUGE AFFAIR

ON Thursday, the 6th of March, 1862, two days after Shrove Tuesday, five women belonging to the village of La Jonchere presented themselves at the police station, at Bougival. They stated that for two days past no one had seen the Widow Lerouge, one of their neighbors, who lived by herself in an isolated cottage. They had several times knocked at the door, but all in vain. The window-shutters as well as the door were closed; and it was impossible to obtain even a glimpse of the interior. This silence, this sudden disappearance, alarmed them. Apprehensive of a crime, or at least of an accident, they requested the interference of the police to satisfy their doubts by forcing the door and entering the house.

Bougival is a pleasant riverside village, peopled on Sundays by crowds of boating parties. Trifling offenses are frequently heard of in its neighborhood, but crimes are rare. The commissary of police at first refused to listen to the women, but their importunities so fatigued him that he at length acceded to their request. He sent for the corporal of gendarmes, with two of his men, called into requisition the services of a locksmith, and, thus accompanied, followed the neighbors of the Widow Lerouge.

La Jonchere owes some celebrity to the inventor of the sliding railway, who for some years past has, with more enterprise than profit, made public trials of his system in the immediate neighborhood. It is a hamlet of no importance, resting upon the slope of the hill which overlooks the Seine between La Malmaison and Bougival. It is about twenty minutes' walk from the main road, which, passing by Rueil and Port-Marly, goes from Paris to St. Germain; and is reached by a steep and rugged lane, quite unknown to the government engineers.

The party, led by the gendarmes, followed the main road which here bordered the river until it reached this lane, into which it turned, and stumbled over the rugged inequalities of the

ground for about a hundred yards, when it arrived in front of a cottage of extremely modest yet respectable appearance. This cottage had probably been built by some little Parisian shopkeeper in love with the beauties of nature; for all the trees had been carefully cut down. It consisted merely of two apartments on the ground floor with a loft above. Around it extended a much-neglected garden, badly protected against midnight prowlers by a very dilapidated stone wall about three feet high, and broken and crumbling in many places. A light wooden gate, clumsily held in its place by pieces of wire, gave access to the garden.

"It is here," said the women.

The commissary stopped. During his short walk, the number of his followers had been rapidly increasing, and now included all the inquisitive and idle persons of the neighborhood. He found himself surrounded by about forty individuals burning with curiosity.

"No one must enter the garden," said he; and, to insure obedience, he placed the two gendarmes on sentry before the entrance, and advanced toward the house, accompanied by the corporal and the locksmith.

He knocked several times loudly with his leaded cane, first at the door, and then successively at all the window-shutters. After each blow, he placed his ear against the wood and listened. Hearing nothing, he turned to the locksmith.

"Open!" said he.

The workman unstrapped his satchel, and produced his implements. He had already introduced a skeleton key into the lock, when a loud exclamation was heard from the crowd outside the gate.

"The key!" they cried. "Here is the key!"

A boy about twelve years old, playing with one of his companions, had seen an enormous key in a ditch by the roadside; he had picked it up and carried it to the cottage in triumph.

"Give it to me, youngster," said the corporal. "We shall see."

The key was tried, and it proved to be the key of the house. The commissary and the locksmith exchanged glances full of sinister misgivings. "This looks bad," muttered the corporal. They entered the house, while the crowd, restrained with difficulty by the gendarmes, stamped with impatience, or leaned

over the garden wall, stretching their necks eagerly, to see or hear something of what was passing within the cottage.

Those who anticipated the discovery of a crime were unhappily not deceived. The commissary was convinced of this as soon as he crossed the threshold. Everything in the first room pointed with a sad eloquence to the recent presence of a malefactor. The furniture was knocked about, and a chest of drawers and two large trunks had been forced and broken open. In the inner room, which served as a sleeping apartment, the disorder was even greater. It seemed as though some furious hand had taken a fiendish pleasure in upsetting everything. Near the fireplace, her face buried in the ashes, lay the dead body of Widow Lerouge. All one side of the face and the hair were burnt; it seemed a miracle that the fire had not caught her clothing.

"Wretches!" exclaimed the corporal. "Could they not have robbed without assassinating the poor woman?"

"But where has she been wounded?" inquired the commissary; "I do not see any blood."

"Look! here between the shoulders," replied the corporal; two fierce blows, by my faith. I'll wager my stripes she had no time to cry out."

He stooped over the corpse and touched it. "She is quite cold," he continued, "and it seems to me that she is no longer very stiff. It is at least thirty-six hours since she received her death-blow."

The commissary began writing, on the corner of a table, a short official report. "We are not here to talk, but to discover the guilty," said he to the corporal. "Let information be at once conveyed to the justice of the peace and the mayor, and send this letter without delay to the Palais de Justice. In a couple of hours an investigating magistrate can be here. In the mean while, I will proceed to make a preliminary inquiry."

"Shall I carry the letter?" asked the corporal of gendarmes.

"No, send one of your men; you will be useful to me here in keeping these people in order, and in finding any witnesses I may want. We must leave everything here as it is. I will install myself in the other room."

A gendarme departed at a run toward the station at Rueil; and the commissary commenced his investigations in regular form, as prescribed by law.

"Who was Widow Lerouge? Where did she come from?"

What did she do? Upon what means, and how did she live? What were her habits, her morals, and what sort of company did she keep? Was she known to have enemies? Was she a miser? Did she pass for being rich?" The commissary knew the importance of ascertaining all this: but although the witnesses were numerous enough, they possessed but little information. The depositions of the neighbors, successively interrogated, were empty, incoherent, and incomplete. No one knew anything of the victim, who was a stranger in the country. Many presented themselves as witnesses, moreover, who came forward less to afford information than to gratify their curiosity. A gardener's wife, who had been friendly with the deceased, and a milkwoman with whom she dealt, were alone able to give a few insignificant though precise details. In a word, after three hours of laborious investigation, after having undergone the infliction of all the gossip of the country, after receiving evidence the most contradictory, and listening to commentaries the most ridiculous, the following is what appeared the most reliable to the commissary:

Twelve years before, at the beginning of 1850, the woman Lerouge had made her appearance at Bougival with a large wagon piled with furniture, linen, and her personal effects. She had alighted at an inn, declaring her intention of settling in the neighborhood, and had immediately gone in quest of a house. Finding this one unoccupied, and thinking it would suit her, she had taken it without trying to beat down the terms, at a rental of three hundred and twenty francs, payable half yearly and in advance, but had refused to sign a lease. The house taken, she occupied it the same day, and expended about a hundred francs on repairs.

She was a woman about fifty-four or fifty-five years of age, well preserved, active, and in the enjoyment of excellent health. No one knew her reasons for taking up her abode in a country where she was an absolute stranger. She was supposed to have come from Normandy, having been frequently seen in the early morning to wear a white cotton cap. This night-cap did not prevent her dressing very smartly during the day; indeed, she ordinarily wore very handsome dresses, very showy ribbons in her caps, and covered herself with jewels like a saint in a chapel. Without doubt she lived on the coast, for ships and the sea recurred incessantly in her conversation.

She did not like speaking of her husband, who had, she said,

perished in a shipwreck. But she had never given the slightest detail. On one particular occasion she had remarked, in presence of the milkwoman and three other persons: "No woman was ever more miserable than I during my married life." And at another she had said: "All new, all fine! My defunct husband only loved me for a year!"

Widow Lerouge passed for rich, or at least for being very well off, and she was not a miser. She had lent a woman at La Malmaison sixty francs with which to pay her rent, and would not let her return them. At another time she had advanced two hundred francs to a fisherman of Port-Marly. She was fond of good living, spent a good deal on her food, and bought wine by the half-cask. She took pleasure in treating her acquaintances, and her dinners were excellent. If complimented on her easy circumstances, she made no very strong denial. She had frequently been heard to say: "I have nothing in the funds, but I have everything I want. If I wished for more, I could have it."

Beyond this, the slightest allusion to her past life, her country, or her family had never escaped her. She was very talkative, but all she would say would be to the detriment of her neighbors. She was supposed, however, to have seen the world, and to know a great deal. She was very distrustful and barricaded herself in her cottage as in a fortress. She never went out in the evening, and it was well known that she got tipsy regularly at her dinner and went to bed very soon afterward.

Rarely had strangers been seen to visit her; four or five times a lady accompanied by a young man had called, and upon one occasion two gentlemen, one young, the other old and decorated, had come in a magnificent carriage.

In conclusion, the deceased was held in but little esteem by her neighbors. Her remarks were often most offensive and odious in the mouth of a woman of her age. She had been heard to give a young girl the most detestable counsels. A pork butcher, belonging to Bougival, embarrassed in his business, and tempted by her supposed wealth, had at one time paid her his addresses. She, however, repelled his advances, declaring that to be married once was enough for her. On several occasions men had been seen in her house: first of all, a young one, who had the appearance of a clerk of the railway company: then another, a tall, elderly man, very sunburnt, who



was dressed in a blouse, and looked very villainous. These men were reported to be her lovers.

While questioning the witnesses, the commissary wrote down their depositions in a more condensed form, and he had got so far, when the investigating magistrate arrived, attended by the chief of the detective police, and one of his subordinates. M. Daburon was a man thirty-eight years of age, and of prepossessing appearance; sympathetic notwithstanding his coldness; wearing upon his countenance a sweet and rather sad expression. This settled melancholy had remained with him ever since his recovery, two years before, from a dreadful malady, which had well-nigh proved fatal. Investigating magistrate since 1859, he had rapidly acquired the most brilliant reputation. Laborious, patient, and acute, he knew with singular skill how to disentangle the skein of the most complicated affair, and from the midst of a thousand threads lay hold of the right one. None better than he, armed with an implacable logic, could solve those terrible problems in which  $x$  represents the criminal. Clever in deducing the unknown from the known, he excelled in collecting facts, and in uniting in a bundle of overwhelming proofs circumstances the most trifling, and in appearance the most insignificant.

Although possessed of qualifications for his office so numerous and valuable, he was tremblingly distrustful of his own abilities and exercised his terrible functions with diffidence and hesitation. He wanted audacity to risk those sudden surprises so often resorted to by his colleagues in the pursuit of truth. Thus it was repugnant to his feelings to deceive even an accused person, or to lay snares for him: in fact, the mere idea of the possibility of a judicial error terrified him. They said of him in the courts: "He is a trembler." What he sought was not conviction, nor the most probable presumptions, but the most absolute certainty. No rest for him until the day when the accused was forced to bow before the evidence; so much so that he had been jestingly reproached with seeking not to discover criminals but innocents.

The chief of detective police was none other than the celebrated Gevrol. He was really an able man, but wanting in perseverance, and liable to be blinded by an incredible obstinacy. If he lost a clue, he could not bring himself to acknowledge it, still less to retrace his steps. His audacity and coolness, however, rendered it impossible to disconcert him; and being pos-

essed of immense personal strength, hidden under a most meagre appearance, he never hesitated to confront the most daring of malefactors. But his specialty, his triumph, his glory, was a memory of faces, so prodigious as to exceed belief. If he saw a face for five minutes, it was enough. Its possessor was catalogued, and would be recognized at any time. The impossibilities of place, the unlikelihood of circumstances, the most incredible disguises would not lead him astray. The reason for this, so he pretended, was because he only looked at a man's eyes, without noticing any other features. This faculty was severely tested some months back at Poissy by the following experiment. Three prisoners were draped in coverings so as to completely disguise their height. Over their faces were thick veils, allowing nothing of the features to be seen except the eyes, for which holes had been made; and in this state they were shown to Gevrol. Without the slightest hesitation he recognized the prisoners and named them. Had chance alone assisted him?

The subordinate Gevrol had brought with him was an old offender, reconciled to the law. A smart fellow in his profession, crafty as a fox, and jealous of his chief, whose abilities he held in light estimation. His name was Lecoq.

The commissary, by this time heartily tired of his responsibilities, welcomed the investigating magistrate and his agents as liberators. He rapidly related the facts collected and read his official report.

"You have proceeded very well," observed the investigating magistrate. "All is stated clearly; yet there is one fact you have omitted to ascertain."

"What is that, sir?" inquired the commissary.

"On what day was Widow Lerouge last seen, and at what hour?"

"I was coming to that presently. She was last seen and spoken to on the evening of Shrove Tuesday, at twenty minutes past five. She was then returning from Bougival with a basketful of purchases."

"You are sure of the hour, sir?" inquired Gevrol.

"Perfectly, and for this reason; the two witnesses who furnished me with this fact, a woman named Tellier and a cooper who lives hard by, alighted from the omnibus which leaves Marly every hour, when they perceived the widow in the cross-road, and hastened to overtake her. They conversed with her

and only left her when they reached the door of her own house."

"And what had she in her basket?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"The witnesses can not say. They only know that she carried two sealed bottles of wine, and another of brandy. She complained to them of headache, and said: 'Though it is customary to enjoy one's self on Shrove Tuesday, I am going to bed.'"

"So, so!" exclaimed the chief of detective police. "I know where to search!"

"You think so?" inquired M. Daburon.

"Why, it is clear enough. We must find the tall, sunburnt man, the gallant in the blouse. The brandy and the wine were intended for his entertainment. The widow expected him to supper. He came, sure enough, the amiable gallant!"

"Oh!" cried the corporal of gendarmes, evidently scandalized, "she was very old, and terribly ugly!"

Gevrol surveyed the honest fellow with an expression of contemptuous pity. "Know, corporal," said he, "that a woman who has money is always young and pretty, if she desires to be thought so!"

"Perhaps there is something in that," remarked the magistrate; "but it is not what strikes me most. I am more impressed by the remark of this unfortunate woman: 'If I wished for more, I could have it.'"

"That also attracted my attention," acquiesced the commissary.

But Gevrol no longer took the trouble to listen. He stuck to his own opinion, and began to inspect minutely every corner of the room. Suddenly he turned toward the commissary. "Now that I think of it," cried he, "was it not on Tuesday that the weather changed? It had been freezing for a fortnight past, and on that evening it rained. At what time did the rain commence here?"

"At half-past nine," answered the corporal. "I went out from supper to make my circuit of the dancing halls, when I was overtaken opposite the Rue des Pecheurs by a heavy shower. In less than ten minutes there was half an inch of water in the road."

"Very well," said Gevrol. "Then if the man came after half-past nine his shoes must have been very muddy. If they were

dry, he arrived sooner. This must have been noticed, for the floor is a polished one. Were there any imprints of footsteps, Mr. Commissary?"

"I must confess we never thought of looking for them."

"Ah!" exclaimed the chief detective, in a tone of irritation, "that is vexatious!"

"Wait," added the commissary; "there is yet time to see if there are any, not in this room, but in the other. We have disturbed absolutely nothing there. My footsteps and the corporal's will be easily distinguished. Let us see."

As the commissary opened the door of the second chamber, Gevrol stopped him. "I ask permission, sir," said he to the investigating magistrate, "to examine the apartment before any one else is permitted to enter. It is very important for me."

"Certainly," approved M. Daburon.

Gevrol passed in first, the others remaining on the threshold. They all took in at a glance the scene of the crime. Everything, as the commissary had stated, seemed to have been overturned by some furious madman. In the middle of the room was a table covered with a fine linen cloth, white as snow. Upon this was placed a magnificent wineglass of the rarest manufacture, a very handsome knife, and a plate of the finest porcelain. There was an opened bottle of wine, hardly touched, and another of brandy, from which about five or six small glassfuls had been taken. On the right, against the wall, stood two handsome walnut-wood wardrobes, with ornamental locks; they were placed one on each side of the window; both were empty, and the contents scattered about on all sides. There were clothing, linen, and other effects unfolded, tossed about, and crumpled. At the end of the room, near the fireplace, a large cupboard used for keeping the crockery was wide open. On the other side of the fireplace, an old secretary with a marble top had been forced, broken, smashed into bits, and rummaged, no doubt, to its inmost recesses. The desk, wrenched away, hung by a single hinge. The drawers had been pulled out and thrown upon the floor. To the left of the room stood the bed, which had been completely disarranged and upset. Even the straw of the mattress had been pulled out and examined.

"Not the slightest imprint," murmured Gevrol, disappointed. "He must have arrived before half-past nine. You can all come in now."

He walked right up to the corpse of the widow, near which

he knelt. "It can not be said," grumbled he, "that the work is not properly done! the assassin is no apprentice!" Then looking right and left, he continued: "Oh! oh! the poor devil was busy with her cooking when he struck her; see her pan of ham and eggs upon the hearth. The brute hadn't patience enough to wait for the dinner. The gentleman was in a hurry, he struck the blow fasting; therefore he can't invoke the gaiety of dessert in his defense!"

"It is evident," said the commissary to the investigating magistrate, "that robbery was the motive of the crime."

"It is probable," answered Gevrol in a sly way; "and that accounts for the absence of the silver spoons from the table."

"Look here! Some pieces of gold in this drawer!" exclaimed Lecoq, who had been searching on his own account, "just three hundred and twenty francs!"

"Well, I never!" cried Gevrol, a little disconcerted. But he soon recovered from his embarrassment, and added: "He must have forgotten them; that often happens. I have known an assassin, who, after accomplishing the murder, became so utterly bewildered as to depart without remembering to take the plunder, for which he had committed the crime. Our man became excited perhaps, or was interrupted. Some one may have knocked at the door. What makes me more willing to think so is that the scamp did not leave the candle burning. You see, he took the trouble to put it out."

"Pooh!" said Lecoq. "That proves nothing. He is probably an economical and careful man."

The investigations of the two agents were continued all over the house; but their most minute researches resulted in discovering absolutely nothing; not one piece of evidence to convict; not the faintest indication which might serve as a point of departure. Even the dead woman's papers, if she possessed any, had disappeared. Not a letter, not a scrap of paper even, to be met with. From time to time Gevrol stopped to swear or grumble. "Oh! it is cleverly done! It is a tiptop piece of work! The scoundrel is a cool hand!"

"Well, what do you make of it?" at length demanded the investigating magistrate.

"It is a drawn game, monsieur," replied Gevrol. "We are baffled for the present. The miscreant has taken his measures with great precaution; but I will catch him. Before night, I shall have a dozen men in pursuit. Besides, he is sure to fall

into our hands. He has carried off the plate and the jewels. He is lost!"

"Despite all that," said M. Daburon, "we are no further advanced than we were this morning!"

"Well!" growled Gevrol, "a man can only do what he can!"

"Ah!" murmured Lecoq in a low tone, perfectly audible, however, "why is not old Tiraucclair here?"

"What could he do more than we have done?" retorted Gevrol, directing a furious glance at his subordinate. Lecoq bowed his head and was silent, inwardly delighted at having wounded his chief.

"Who is old Tiraucclair?" asked M. Daburon. "It seems to me that I have heard the name, but I can't remember where."

"He is an extraordinary man!" exclaimed Lecoq.

"He was formerly a clerk at the Mont de Piete," added Gevrol; "but he is now a rich old fellow, whose real name is Tabaret. He goes in for playing the detective by way of amusement."

"And to augment his revenues," insinuated the commissary.

"He?" cried Lecoq. "No danger of that. He works so much for the glory of success that he often spends money from his own pocket. It's his amusement, you see! At the Prefecture we have nicknamed him 'Tiraucclair,' from a phrase he is constantly in the habit of repeating. Ah! he is sharp, the old weasel! It was he who in the case of that banker's wife, you remember, guessed that the lady had robbed herself, and who proved it."

"True!" retorted Gevrol; "and it was also he who almost had poor Dereme guillotined for killing his wife, a thorough bad woman; and all the while the poor man was innocent."

"We are wasting our time, gentlemen," interrupted M. Daburon. Then, addressing himself to Lecoq, he added: "Go and find M. Tabaret. I have heard a great deal of him, and shall be glad to see him at work here."

Lecoq started off at a run. Gevrol was seriously humiliated. "You have, of course, sir, the right to demand the services of whom you please," commenced he, "but yet—"

"Do not," interrupted M. Daburon, "let us lose our tempers, M. Gevrol. I have known you for a long time, and I know your worth; but to-day we happen to differ in opinion. You hold absolutely to your sunburnt man in the blouse, and I, on my side, am convinced that you are not on the right track!"

"I think I am right," replied the detective, "and I hope to prove it. I shall find the scoundrel, be he whom he may!"

"I ask nothing better," said M. Daburon.

"Only permit me, sir, to give—what shall I say without failing in respect—a piece of advice?"

"Speak!"

"I would advise you, sir, to distrust old Tabaret."

"Really? And for what reason?"

"The old fellow allows himself to be carried away too much by appearances. He has become an amateur detective for the sake of popularity, just like an author; and, as he is vainer than a peacock, he is apt to lose his temper and be very obstinate. As soon as he finds himself in the presence of a crime, like this one, for example, he pretends he can explain everything on the instant. And he manages to invent a story that will correspond exactly with the situation. He professes, with the help of one single fact, to be able to reconstruct all the details of an assassination, as a savant pictures an antediluvian animal from a single bone. Sometimes he divines correctly; very often, though, he makes a mistake. Take, for instance, the case of the tailor, the unfortunate Dereme, without me—"

"I thank you for your advice," interrupted M. Daburon, "and will profit by it. Now, commissary," he continued, "it is most important to ascertain from what part of the country Widow Lerouge came."

The procession of witnesses under the charge of the corporal of gendarmes were again interrogated by the investigating magistrate. But nothing new was elicited. It was evident that Widow Lerouge had been a singularly discreet woman; for, although very talkative, nothing in any way connected with her antecedents remained in the memory of the gossips of La Jonchere. All the people interrogated, however, obstinately tried to impart to the magistrate their own convictions and personal conjectures. Public opinion sided with Gevrol. Every voice denounced the tall sunburnt man with the gray blouse. He must surely be the culprit. Every one remembered his ferocious aspect, which had frightened the whole neighborhood. He had one evening menaced a woman, and another day beaten a child. They could point out neither the child nor the woman; but no matter: these brutal acts were notoriously public. M. Daburon began to despair of gaining the least enlightenment, when some one brought the wife of a grocer of Bougival, at whose shop

the victim used to deal, and a child thirteen years old, who knew, it was said, something positive.

The grocer's wife first made her appearance. She had heard Widow Lerouge speak of having a son still living.

"Are you quite sure of that?" asked the investigating magistrate.

"As of my existence," answered the woman, "for, on that evening, yes, it was evening, she was, saving your presence, a little tipsy. She remained in my shop more than an hour."

"And what did she say?"

"I think I see her now," continued the shopkeeper: "she was leaning against the counter near the scales, jesting with a fisherman of Marly, old Husson, who can tell you the same; and she called him a fresh-water sailor. 'My husband,' said she, 'was a real sailor, and the proof is, he would sometimes remain years on a voyage, and always used to bring me back coconuts. I have a son who is also a sailor, like his dead father, in the imperial navy.'"

"Did she mention her son's name?"

"Not that time, but another evening, when she was, if I may say so, very drunk. She told us that her son's name was Jacques, and that she had not seen him for a very long time."

"Did she speak ill of her husband?"

"Never! She only said he was jealous and brutal, though a good man at bottom, and that he led her a miserable life. He was weak-headed, and forged ideas out of nothing at all. In fact, he was too honest to be wise."

"Did her son ever come to see her while she lived here?"

"She never told me of it."

"Did she spend much money with you?"

"That depends. About sixty francs a month; sometimes more, for she always buys the best brandy. She paid cash for all she bought."

The woman, knowing no more, was dismissed. The child, who was now brought forward, belonged to parents in easy circumstances. Tall and strong for his age, he had bright, intelligent eyes, and features expressive of watchfulness and cunning. The presence of the magistrate did not seem to intimidate him in the least.

"Let us hear, my boy," said M. Daburon, "what you know?"

"Well, sir, a few days ago, on Sunday last, I saw a man at Madame Lerouge's garden gate."



"At what time of the day?"

"Early in the morning. I was going to church, to serve in the second mass."

"Well," continued the magistrate, "and this man was tall and sunburnt, and dressed in a blouse?"

"No, sir; on the contrary, he was short, very fat, and old."

"You are sure you are not mistaken?"

"Quite sure," replied the urchin; "I saw him close face to face, for I spoke to him."

"Tell me, then, what occurred?"

"Well, sir, I was passing when I saw this fat man at the gate. He appeared very much vexed, oh! but awfully vexed! His face was red, or rather purple, as far as the middle of his head, which I could see very well, for it was bare, and had very little hair on it."

"And did he speak to you first?"

"Yes, sir, he saw me, and called out, 'Halloa! youngster!' as I came up to him, and he asked me if I had got a good pair of legs. I answered yes. Then he took me by the ear, but without hurting me, and said: 'Since that is so, if you will run an errand for me, I will give you ten sous. Run as far as the Seine; and when you reach the quay, you will notice a large boat moored. Go on board, and ask to see Captain Gervais: he is sure to be there. Tell him that he can prepare to leave, that I am ready.' Then he put ten sous in my hand, and off I went."

"If all the witnesses were like this bright little fellow," murmured the commissary, "what a pleasure it would be!"

"Now," said the magistrate, "tell us how you executed your commission."

"I went to the boat, sir, found the man, and I told him; and that's all."

Gevrol, who had listened with the most lively attention, leaned over toward the ear of M. Daburon, and said in a low voice: "Will you permit me, sir, to ask the brat a few questions?"

"Certainly, M. Gevrol."

"Come now, my little friend," said Gevrol, "if you saw this man again, would you know him?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Then there was something remarkable about him?"

"Yes, I should think so! his face was the color of a brick."

"And is that all?"

"Well, yes, sir."

"But you must remember how he was dressed; had he a blouse on?"

"No; he wore a jacket. Under the arms were very large pockets, and from out of one of them peeped a blue-spotted handkerchief."

"What kind of trousers had he on?"

"I do not remember."

"And his waistcoat?"

"Let me see," answered the child. "I don't think he wore a waistcoat. And yet—but no, I remember he did not wear one; he had a long cravat, fastened near his neck by a large ring."

"Ah!" said Gevrol with an air of satisfaction, "you are a bright boy; and I wager that if you try hard to remember you will find a few more details to give us."

The boy hung down his head and remained silent. From the knitting of his young brows it was plain he was making a violent effort of memory. "Yes," cried he suddenly, "I remember another thing."

"What?"

"The man wore very large rings in his ears."

"Bravo!" cried Gevrol, "here is a complete description. I shall find the fellow now. M. Daburon can prepare a warrant for his appearance whenever he likes."

"I believe, indeed, the testimony of this child is of the highest importance," said M. Daburon; and turning to the boy, added: "Can you tell us, my little friend, with what this boat was loaded?"

"No, sir, I couldn't see, because it was decked."

"Which way was she going, up the Seine or down?"

"Neither, sir; she was moored."

"We know that," said Gevrol. "The magistrate asks you which way the prow of the boat was turned—toward Paris or toward Marly?"

"The two ends of the boat seemed alike to me."

The chief of the detective police made a gesture of disappointment.

"At least," said he, addressing the child again, "you noticed

the name of the boat? you can read, I suppose. One should always know the names of the boats one goes aboard of."

"No, I didn't see any name," said the little boy.

"If this boat was moored at the quay," remarked M. Daburon, "it was probably noticed by the inhabitants of Bougival."

"That is true, sir," approved the commissary.

"Yes," said Gevrol, "and the sailors must have come ashore. I shall find out all about it at the wine-shop. But what sort of a man was Gervais, the master, my little friend?"

"Like all the sailors hereabouts, sir."

The child was preparing to depart when M. Daburon recalled him.

"Before you go, my boy, tell me, have you spoken to any one of this meeting before to-day?"

"Yes, sir, I told all to mama when I got back from church, and gave her the ten sous."

"And you have told us the whole truth?" continued the magistrate. "You know that it is a very grave matter to attempt to impose on justice. She always finds it out, and it is my duty to warn you that she inflicts the most terrible punishment upon liars."

The little fellow blushed as red as a cherry, and held down his head.

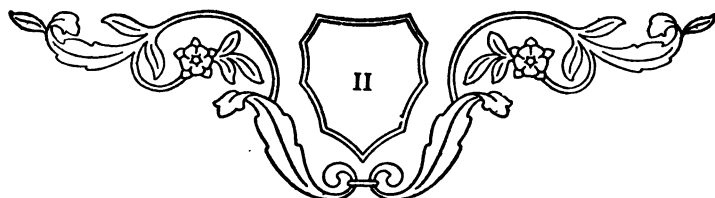
"I see," pursued M. Daburon, "that you have concealed something from us. Don't you know that the police know everything?"

"Pardon! sir," cried the boy, bursting into tears; "pardon. Don't punish me, and I will never do so again."

"Tell us, then, how you have deceived us?"

"Well, sir, it was not ten sous that the man gave me; it was twenty sous. I only gave half to mama; and I kept the rest to buy marbles with."

"My little friend," said the investigating magistrate, "for this time I forgive you. But let it be a lesson for the remainder of your life. You may go now, and remember it is useless to try and hide the truth; it always comes to light!"



**T**HE two last depositions awakened in M. Daburon's mind some slight gleams of hope. In the midst of darkness the humblest rushlight acquires brilliancy.

"I will go at once to Bougival, sir, if you approve of this step," suggested Gevrol.

"Perhaps you would do well to wait a little," answered M. Daburon. "This man was seen on Sunday morning; we will inquire into Widow Lerouge's movements on that day."

Three neighbors were called. They all declared that the widow had kept her bed all Sunday. To one woman who, hearing she was unwell, had visited her, she said: "Ah! I had last night a terrible accident." Nobody at the time attached any significance to these words.

"The man with the rings in his ears becomes more and more important," said the magistrate when the woman had retired. "To find him again is indispensable: you must see to this, M. Gevrol."

"Before eight days I shall have him," replied the chief of detective police, "if I have to search every boat on the Seine, from its source to the ocean. I know the name of the captain, Gervais. The navigation office will tell me something."

He was interrupted by Lecoq, who rushed into the house breathless. "Here is old Tabaret," he said. "I met him just as he was going out. What a man! He wouldn't wait for the train, but gave I don't know how much to a cabman; and we drove here in fifty minutes!"

Almost immediately a man appeared at the door whose aspect it must be admitted was not at all what one would have expected of a person who had joined the police for honor alone. He was certainly sixty years old, and did not look a bit younger. Short, thin, and rather bent, he leaned on the carved ivory handle of a stout cane. His round face wore that expression of perpetual astonishment, mingled with uneasiness, which has made the fortunes of two comic actors of the Palais Royal

Theatre. Scrupulously shaved, he presented a very short chin, large and good-natured lips, and a nose disagreeably elevated, like the broad end of one of Sax's horns. His eyes, of a dull gray, were small and red at the lids, and absolutely void of expression; yet they fatigued the observer by their insupportable restlessness. A few straight hairs shaded his forehead, which receded like that of a greyhound, and through their scantiness barely concealed his long, ugly ears. He was very comfortably dressed, clean as a new franc piece, displaying linen of dazzling whiteness, and wearing silk gloves and leather gaiters. A long and massive gold chain, very vulgar looking, was twisted thrice round his neck, and fell in cascades into the pocket of his waistcoat.

M. Tabaret, surnamed Tiraclair, stood at the threshold, and bowed almost to the ground, bending his old back into an arch, and in the humblest of voices asked: "The investigating magistrate has deigned to send for me?"

"Yes!" replied M. Daburon, adding under his breath; "and if you are a man of any ability, there is at least nothing to indicate it in your appearance."

"I am here," continued the old fellow, "completely at the service of justice."

"I wish to know," said M. Daburon, "whether you can discover some clue that will put us upon the track of the assassin. I will explain the—"

"Oh, I know enough of it!" interrupted old Tabaret. "Lecoq has told me the principal facts, just as much as I desire to know."

"Nevertheless—" commenced the commissary of police.

"If you will permit me, I prefer to proceed without receiving any details, in order to be more fully master of my own impressions. When one knows another's opinion it can't help influencing one's judgment. I will, if you please, at once commence my researches, with Lecoq's assistance."

As the old fellow spoke his little gray eyes dilated and became brilliant as carbuncles. His face reflected an internal satisfaction; even his wrinkles seemed to laugh. His figure became erect, and his step was almost elastic, as he darted into the inner chamber. He remained there about half an hour; then came out running, then reentered, and then again came out; once more he disappeared and reappeared again almost immediately. The magistrate could not help comparing him

to a pointer on the scent, his turned-up nose even moved about as if to discover some subtle odor left by the assassin. All the while he talked loudly and with much gesticulation, apostrophizing himself, scolding himself, uttering little cries of triumph or self-encouragement. He did not allow Lecoq to have a moment's rest. He wanted this or that or the other thing. He demanded paper and pencil. Then he wanted a spade; and finally he cried out for plaster of Paris, some water, and a bottle of oil. When more than an hour had elapsed, the investigating magistrate began to grow impatient, and asked what had become of the amateur detective.

"He is on the road," replied the corporal, "lying flat in the mud, and mixing some plaster in a plate. He says he has nearly finished, and that he is coming back presently."

He returned in fact almost instantly, joyous, triumphant, looking at least twenty years younger. Lecoq followed him, carrying with the utmost precaution a large basket. "I have solved the riddle!" said Tabaret to the magistrate. "It is all clear now, and as plain as noonday. Lecoq, my lad, put the basket on the table."

Gevrol at this moment returned from his expedition equally delighted. "I am on the track of the man with the earrings," said he; "the boat went down the river. I have obtained an exact description of the master Gervais."

"What have you discovered, M. Tabaret?" asked the magistrate.

The old fellow carefully emptied upon the table the contents of the basket—a big lump of clay, several large sheets of paper, and three or four small lumps of plaster yet damp. Standing behind this table, he presented a grotesque resemblance to those mountebank conjurers who in the public squares juggle the money of the lookers-on. His clothes had greatly suffered: he was covered with mud up to his chin. "In the first place," said he at last in a tone of affected modesty, "robbery has had nothing to do with the crime that occupies our attention."

"Oh! of course not!" muttered Gevrol.

"I shall prove it," continued old Tabaret, "by the evidence. By and by I shall offer my humble opinion as to the real motive. In the second place, the assassin arrived here before half-past nine; that is to say, before the rain fell. No more than M. Gevrol have I been able to discover traces of muddy footsteps; but under the table, on the spot where his feet rested, I find

dust. We are thus assured of the hour. The widow did not in the least expect her visitor. She had commenced undressing, and was winding up her cuckoo clock when he knocked."

"These are absolute details!" cried the commissary.

"But easily established," replied the amateur. "You see this cuckoo clock above the secretary: it is one of those which run fourteen or fifteen hours at most, for I have examined it. Now it is more than probable, it is certain, that the widow wound it up every evening before going to bed. How, then, is it that the clock has stopped at five? Because she must have touched it. As she was drawing the chain the assassin knocked. In proof, I show this chair standing under the clock, and on the seat a very plain footmark. Now look at the dress of the victim; the body of it is off. In order to open the door more quickly, she did not wait to put it on again, but hastily threw this old shawl over her shoulders.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the corporal, evidently struck.

"The widow," continued the old fellow, "knew the person who knocked. Her haste to open the door gives rise to this conjecture; what follows proves it. The assassin then gained admission without difficulty. He is a young man, a little above the middle height, elegantly dressed. He wore on that evening a high hat. He carried an umbrella, and smoked a trabucos cigar in a holder."

"Ridiculous!" cried Gevrol. "This is too much."

"Too much, perhaps," retorted old Tabaret. "At all events, it is the truth. If you are not minute in your investigations, I can not help it; anyhow, I am. I search, and I find. Too much, say you? Well deign to glance at these lumps of damp plaster. They represent the heels of the boots worn by the assassin, of which I found a most perfect impression near the ditch where the key was picked up. On these sheets of paper I have marked in outline the imprint of the foot which I can not take up, because it is on some sand. Look! heel high, instep pronounced, sole small and narrow—an elegant boot, belonging to a foot well cared for evidently. Look for this impression all along the path, and you will find it again twice. Then you will find it five times repeated in the garden where no one else had been; and these footprints prove, by the way, that the stranger knocked not at the door, but at the window-shutter, beneath which shone a gleam of light. At the entrance to the garden the man leaped to avoid a flower-bed! the point

of the foot, more deeply imprinted than usual, shows it. He leaped more than two yards with ease, proving that he is active, and therefore young."

Old Tabaret spoke in a low voice, clear and penetrating; and his eye glanced from one to the other of his auditors, watching the impression he was making. "Does the hat astonish you, M. Gevrol?" he pursued. "Just look at the circle traced in the dust on the marble top of the secretary. Is it because I have mentioned his height that you are surprised? Take the trouble to examine the tops of the wardrobes and you will see that the assassin passed his hands across them. Therefore he is taller than I am. Do not say that he got on a chair, for in that case he would have seen and would not have been obliged to feel. Are you astonished about the umbrella? This lump of earth shows an admirable impression not only of the end of the stick, but even of the little round piece of wood which is always placed at the end of the silk. Perhaps you can not get over the statement that he smoked a cigar? Here is the end of a trabucos that I found among the ashes. Has the end been bitten? No. Has it been moistened with saliva? No. Then he who smoked it used a cigar-holder."

Lecoq was unable to conceal his enthusiastic admiration, and noiselessly rubbed his hands together. The commissary appeared stupefied, while M. Daburon was delighted. Gevrol's face, on the contrary, was sensibly elongated. As for the corporal, he was overwhelmed.

"Now," continued the old fellow, "follow me closely. We have traced the young man into the house. How he explained his presence at this hour, I do not know; this much is certain, he told the widow he had not dined. The worthy woman was delighted to hear it, and at once set to work to prepare a meal. This meal was not for herself; for in the cupboard I have found the remains of her own dinner. She had dined off fish; the autopsy will confirm the truth of this statement. Besides you can see yourselves, there is but one glass on the table and one knife. But who is this young man? Evidently the widow looked upon him as a man of superior rank to her own; for in the cupboard is a table-cloth still very clean. Did she use it? No. For her guest she brought out a clean linen one, her very best. It is for him this magnificent glass, a present, no doubt, and it is evident she did not often use this knife with the ivory handle."



"That is all true," murmured M. Daburon, "very true."

"Now then we have got the young man seated. He began by drinking a glass of wine, while the widow was putting her pan on the fire. Then, his heart failing him, he asked for brandy, and swallowed about five small glassfuls. After an internal struggle of ten minutes (the time it must have taken to cook the ham and eggs as much as they are), the young man arose and approached the widow, who was squatting down and leaning forward over her cooking. He stabbed her twice in the back; but she was not killed instantly. She half arose seizing the assassin by the hands; while he drew back, lifting her suddenly, and then hurling her down in the position in which you see her. This short struggle is indicated by the posture of the body; for, squatting down and being struck in the back, it is naturally on her back that she ought to have fallen.

"The murderer used a sharp narrow weapon, which was, unless I am deceived, the end of a foil, sharpened, and with the button broken off. By wiping the weapon upon his victim's skirt, the assassin leaves us this indication. He was not, however, hurt in the struggle. The victim must have clung with a death-grip to his hands; but, as he had not taken off his lavender kid gloves—"

"Why this is romance," exclaimed Gevrol.

"Have you examined the dead woman's finger-nails, M. Gevrol? No. Well, do so, and then tell me whether I am mistaken. The woman, now dead, we come to the object of her assassination. What did this well-dressed young gentleman want? Money? Valuables? No! no! a hundred times no! What he wanted, what he sought, and what he found, were papers, documents, letters, which he knew to be in the possession of the victim. To find them, he overturned everything, upset the cupboards, unfolded the linen, broke open the secretary, of which he could not find the key, and even emptied the mattress of the bed. At last he found these documents. And then do you know what he did with them? Why, burned them, of course; not in the fire-place, but in the little stove in the front room. His end accomplished, what does he do next? He flies, carrying with him all that he finds valuable, to baffle detection, by suggesting a robbery. He wrapped everything he found worth taking in the napkin which was to have served him at dinner, and blowing out the candle, he fled, locking the

door on the outside, and throwing the key into a ditch. And that is all."

"M. Tabaret," said the magistrate, "your investigation is admirable; and I am persuaded your inferences are correct."

"Ah!" cried Lecoq, "is he not colossal, my old Tiraucclair?"

"Pyramidal!" cried Gevrol ironically. "I fear, however, your well-dressed young man must have been just a little embarrassed in carrying a bundle covered with a snow white napkin, which could be so easily seen from a distance."

"He did not carry it a hundred leagues," responded old Tabaret. "You may well believe, that, to reach the railway station, he was not fool enough to take the omnibus. No, he returned on foot by the shortest way, which borders the river. Now on reaching the Seine, unless he is more knowing than I take him to be, his first care was to throw this telltale bundle into the water."

"Do you believe so, M. Tiraucclair?" asked Gevrol.

"I don't mind making a bet on it; and the best evidence of my belief is, that I have sent three men, under the surveillance of a gendarme, to drag the Seine at the nearest spot from here. If they succeed in finding the bundle, I have promised them a recompense."

"Out of your own pocket, old enthusiast?"

"Yes, M. Gevrol, out of my own pocket."

"If they should, however, find this bundle!" murmured M. Daburon.

He was interrupted by the entrance of a gendarme, who said: "Here is a soiled table-napkin, filled with plate, money, and jewels, which these men have found; they claim the hundred francs' reward, promised them."

Old Tabaret took from his pocket-book a bank-note, which he handed to the gendarme. "Now," demanded he, crushing Gevrol with one disdainful glance, "what thinks the investigating magistrate after this?"

"That, thanks to your remarkable penetration, we shall discover, and—"

He did not finish. The doctor summoned to make the post-mortem examination entered the room. That unpleasant task accomplished, it only confirmed the assertions and conjectures of old Tabaret. The doctor explained, as the old man had done, the position of the body. In his opinion also, there had been a struggle. He pointed out a bluish circle, hardly per-

ceptible, round the neck of the victim, produced apparently by the powerful grasp of the murderer; finally he declared that Widow Lerouge had eaten about three hours before being struck.

Nothing now remained except to collect the different objects which would be useful for the prosecution, and might at a later period confound the culprit. Old Tabaret examined with extreme care the dead woman's finger nails; and, using infinite precaution, he even extracted from behind them several small particles of kid. The largest of these pieces was not above the twenty-fifth part of an inch in length; but all the same their color was easily distinguishable. He put aside also the part of the dress upon which the assassin had wiped his weapon. These with the bundle recovered from the Seine, and the different casts taken by the old fellow, were all the traces the murderer had left behind him. It was not much; but this little was enormous in the eyes of M. Daburon; and he had strong hopes of discovering the culprit. The greatest obstacle to success in the unraveling of mysterious crimes is in mistaking the motive. If the researches take at the first step a false direction, they are diverted further and further from the truth, in proportion to the length they are followed. Thanks to old Tabaret, the magistrate felt confident that he was on the right path.

Night had come on. M. Daburon had now nothing more to do at La Jonchere; but Gevrol, who still clung to his own opinion of the guilt of the man with the rings in his ears, declared he would remain at Bougival. He determined to employ the evening in visiting the different wine-shops, and finding, if possible, new witnesses. At the moment of departure, after the commissary and the entire party had wished M. Daburon good night, the latter asked M. Tabaret to accompany him.

"I was about to solicit that honor," replied the old fellow. They set out together; and naturally the crime which had been discovered, and with which they were mutually preoccupied, formed the subject of their conversation.

"Shall we, or shall we not, ascertain the antecedents of this woman!" repeated old Tabaret. "All depends upon that now!"

"We shall ascertain them, if the grocer's wife has told the truth," replied M. Daburon. "If the husband of Widow Lerouge was a sailor, and if her son Jacques is in the navy, the

minister of marine can furnish information that will soon lead to their discovery. I will write to the minister this very night."

They reached the station at Rueil, and took their places in the train. They were fortunate enough to secure a first-class carriage to themselves. But old Tabaret was no longer disposed for conversation. He reflected, he sought, he combined; and in his face might easily be read the working of his thoughts. M. Daburon watched him curiously and felt singularly attracted by this eccentric old man, whose very original taste had led him to devote his services to the secret police of the Rue de Jerusalem. "M. Tabaret," he suddenly asked, "have you been long associated with the police?"

"Nine years, M. Daburon, more than nine years; and permit me to confess I am a little surprised that you have never before heard of me."

"I certainly knew you by reputation," answered M. Daburon; "but your name did not occur to me, and it was only in consequence of hearing you praised that I had the excellent idea of asking your assistance. But what, I should like to know, is your reason for adopting this employment?"

"Sorrow, sir, loneliness, weariness. Ah! I have not always been happy!"

"I have been told, though, that you are rich."

The old fellow heaved a deep sigh, which revealed the most cruel deceptions. "I am well off, sir," he replied; "but I have not always been so. Until I was forty-five years old, my life was a series of absurd and useless privations. I had a father who wasted my youth, ruined my life, and made me the most pitiable of human creatures."

There are men who can never divest themselves of their professional habits. M. Daburon was at all times and seasons more or less an investigating magistrate. "How, M. Tabaret?" he inquired; "your father the author of all your misfortunes?"

"Alas, yes, sir! I have forgiven him at last; but I used to curse him heartily. In the first transports of my resentment, I heaped upon his memory all the insults that can be inspired by the most violent hatred, when I learnt . . . But I will confide my history to you, M. Daburon. When I was five and twenty years of age, I was earning two thousand francs a year, as a clerk at the Monte de Piete. One morning my father

entered my lodging, and abruptly announced to me that he was ruined, and without food or shelter. He appeared in despair, and talked of killing himself. I loved my father. Naturally, I strove to reassure him; I boasted of my situation, and explained to him as some length, that, while I earned the means for living, he should want for nothing; and, to commence, I insisted that henceforth we should live together. No sooner said than done, and during twenty years I was encumbered with the old—"

"What! you repent of your admirable conduct, M. Tabaret?"

"Do I repent of it! That is to say he deserved to be poisoned by the bread I gave him."

M. Daburon was unable to repress a gesture of surprise, which did not escape the old fellow's notice.

"Hear, before you condemn me," he continued. "There was I at twenty-five, imposing upon myself the severest privations for the sake of my father,—no more friends, no more flirtations, nothing. In the evenings, to augment our scanty revenues, I worked at copying law papers for a notary. I denied myself even the luxury of tobacco. Notwithstanding this, the old fellow complained without ceasing; he regretted his lost fortune; he must have pocket-money, with which to buy this, or that; my utmost exertions failed to satisfy him. Ah, Heaven alone knows what I suffered. I was not born to live alone and grow old like a dog. I longed for the pleasures of a home and a family. My dream was to marry, to adore a good wife, by whom I might be loved a little, and to see innocent healthy little ones gamboling about my knees. But pshaw! when such thoughts entered my heart and forced a tear or two from my eyes, I rebelled against myself. I said: 'My lad, when you earn but three thousand francs a year, and have an old and cherished father to support, it is your duty to stifle such desires, and remain a bachelor.' And yet I met a young girl. It is thirty years now since that time; well! just look at me, I am sure I am blushing as red as a tomato. Her name was Hortense. Who can tell what has become of her! She was beautiful and poor. Well, I was quite an old man when my father died, the wretch, the—"

"M. Tabaret!" interrupted the magistrate, "for shame, M. Tabaret!"

"But I have already told you, I have forgiven him, sir. However you will soon understand my anger. On the day of

his death, looking in his secretary, I found a memorandum of an income of twenty thousand francs!"

"How so! was he rich?"

"Yes, very rich; for that was not all; he owned near Orleans a property leased for six thousand francs a year. He owned, besides, the house I now live in, where we lived together; and I, fool, sot, imbecile, stupid animal that I was, used to pay the rent every three months to the concierge!"

"That was too much!" M. Daburon could not help saying.

"Was it not, sir? I was robbing myself of my own money! To crown his hypocrisy, he left a will wherein he declared, in the name of the Holy Trinity, that he had no other aim in view, in thus acting, than my own advantage. He wished, so he wrote, to habituate me to habits of good order and economy, and keep me from the commission of follies. And I was forty-five years old, and for twenty years I had been reproaching myself if ever I spent a single sou uselessly. In short, he had speculated on my good heart, he had— Bah! on my word, it is enough to disgust the human race with filial piety!"

M. Tabaret's anger, albeit very real and justified, was so highly ludicrous, that M. Daburon had much difficulty to restrain his laughter, in spite of the real sadness of the recital.

"At least," said he, "this fortune must have given you pleasure."

"Not at all, sir, it came too late. Of what avail to have the bread when one has no longer the teeth? The marriageable age had passed. I resigned my situation, however, to make way for some one poorer than myself. At the end of a month I was sick and tired of life; and, to replace the affections that had been denied me, I resolved to give myself a passion, a hobby, a mania. I became a collector of books. You think, sir, perhaps that to take an interest in books a man must have studied, must be learned?"

"I know, dear M. Tabaret, that he must have money. I am acquainted with an illustrious bibliomaniac who may be able to read, but who is most certainly unable to sign his own name."

"This is very likely. I, too, can read; and I read all the books I bought. I collected all I could find which related, no matter how little to the police. Memoirs, reports, pamphlets, speeches, letters, novels—all suited me; and I devoured them. So much so, that little by little I became attracted toward the

mysterious power which, from the obscurity of the Rue de Jerusalem, watches over and protects society, which penetrates everywhere, lifts the most impervious veils, sees through every plot, divines what is kept hidden, knows exactly the value of a man, the price of a conscience, and which accumulates in its portfolios the most terrible, as well as the most shameful secrets! In reading the memoirs of celebrated detectives, more attractive to me than the fables of our best authors, I became inspired by an enthusiastic admiration for those men, so keen scented, so subtle, flexible as steel, artful and penetrating, fertile in expedients, who follow crime on the trail, armed with the law, through the brushwood of legality, as relentlessly as the savages of Cooper pursue their enemies in the depths of the American forests. The desire seized me to become a wheel of this admirable machine—a small assistance in the punishment of crime and the triumph of innocence. I made the essay; and I found I did not succeed too badly.”

“And does this employment please you?”

“I owe to it, sir, my liveliest enjoyments. Adieu weariness! since I have abandoned the search for books to the search for men. I shrug my shoulders when I see a foolish fellow pay twenty-five francs for the right of hunting a hare. What a prize! Give me the hunting of a man! *That*, at least, calls the faculties into play, and the victory is not inglorious! The game in my sport is equal to the hunter; they both possess intelligence, strength, and cunning. The arms are nearly equal. Ah! if people but knew the excitement of these games of hide and seek which are played between the criminal and the detective, everybody would be wanting employment at the office of the Rue de Jerusalem. The misfortune is, that the art is becoming lost. Great crimes are now so rare. The race of strong fearless criminals has given place to the mob of vulgar pick-pockets. The few rascals who are heard of occasionally are as cowardly as foolish. They sign their names to their misdeeds, and even leave their cards lying about. There is no merit in catching them. Their crime found out, you have only to go and arrest them.”

“It seems to me, though,” interrupted M. Daburon, smiling, “that our assassin is not such a bungler.”

“He, sir, is an exception; and I shall have greater delight in tracking him. I will do everything for that, I will even compromise myself if necessary. For I ought to confess, M.

Daburon," added he, slightly embarrassed, "that I do not boast to my friends of my exploits; I even conceal them as carefully as possible. They would perhaps shake hands with me less warmly did they know that Tiraucclair and Tabaret were one and the same."

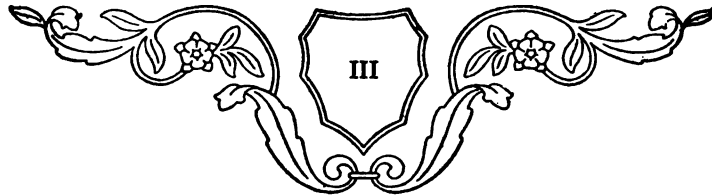
Insensibly the crime became again the subject of conversation. It was agreed, that, the first thing in the morning, M. Tabaret should install himself at Bougival. He boasted that in eight days he should examine all the people round about. On his side M. Daburon promised to keep him advised of the least evidence that transpired, and recall him, if by any chance he should procure the papers of Widow Lerouge.

"To you, M. Tabaret," said the magistrate in conclusion, "I shall be always at home. If you have any occasion to speak to me, do not hesitate to come at night as well as during the day. I rarely go out, and you will always find me either at my home, Rue Jacob, or in my office at the Palais de Justice. I will give orders for your admittance whenever you present yourself."

The train entered the station at this moment. M. Daburon, having called a cab, offered a seat to M. Tabaret. The old fellow declined. "It is not worth while," he replied, "for I live, as I have had the honor of telling you, in the Rue St. Lazare, only a few steps from here."

"Till to-morrow, then!" said M. Daburon.

"Till to-morrow," replied old Tabaret; and he added, "We shall succeed."



**M.** TABARET'S house was in fact not more than four minutes' walk from the railway terminus of St. Lazare. It was a fine building carefully kept, and which probably yielded a fine income, though the rents were not too high. The old fellow found plenty of room in it. He occupied on the first floor, overlooking the street, some handsome apartments, well arranged and comfortably furnished, the principal of which was



his collection of books. He lived very simply from taste, as well as habit, waited on by an old servant, to whom on great occasions the concierge lent a helping hand.

No one in the house had the slightest suspicion of the avocations of the proprietor. Besides, even the humblest agent of police would be expected to possess a degree of acuteness for which no one gave M. Tabaret credit. Indeed, they mistook for incipient idiocy his continual abstraction of mind. It is true that all who knew him remarked the singularity of his habits. His frequent absences from home had given to his proceedings an appearance at once eccentric and mysterious. Never was young libertine more irregular in his habits than this old man. He came or failed to come home to his meals, ate it mattered not what or when. He went out at every hour of the day and night, often slept abroad, and even disappeared for entire weeks at a time. Then, too, he received the strangest visitors, odd-looking men of suspicious appearance, and fellows of ill-favored and sinister aspect. This irregular way of living had robbed the old fellow of much consideration. Many believed they saw in him a shameless libertine, who squandered his income in disreputable places. They would remark to one another: "Is it not disgraceful in a man of his age?" He was aware of all this tittle-tattle, and laughed at it. This did not, however, prevent many of his tenants from seeking his society and paying court to him. They would invite him to dinner, but he almost invariably refused.

He seldom visited but one person of the house, but with that one he was very intimate, so much so, indeed, that he was more often in her apartment than in his own. She was a widow lady, who for fifteen years had occupied an apartment on the third floor. Her name was Madame Gerdy, and she lived with her son Noel, whom she adored.

Noel Gerdy was a man thirty-three years of age, but looking older; tall and well made, he had a noble and intelligent face, large black eyes, and black hair which curled naturally. A barrister, he passed for having great talent, and greater industry, and had already gained a certain amount of notoriety. He was an obstinate worker, cold and meditative, though devoted to his profession, and affected, with some ostentation, perhaps, a great rigidity of principle, and austerity of manners.

In Madame Gerdy's apartment, old Tabaret felt himself quite at home. He considered her as a relation, and looked upon

Noel as a son. In spite of her fifty years, he had often thought of asking the hand of his charming widow, and was restrained less by the fear of a refusal than its consequence. To propose and to be rejected would sever the existing relations, so pleasurable to him. However, he had by his will, which was deposited with his notary, constituted this young barrister his sole legatee; with the single condition of founding an annual prize of two thousand francs to be bestowed on the police agent who during the year had unraveled the most obscure and mysterious crime.

Short as was the distance to his house, old Tabaret was a good quarter of an hour in reaching it. On leaving M. Daburon his thoughts reverted to the scene of the murder; and so blinded was the old fellow to external objects that he moved along the street, first jostled on the right, then on the left, by the busy passers-by, advancing one step and receding two. He repeated to himself for the fiftieth time the words uttered by Widow Lerouge, as reported by the milkwoman. "If I wished for any more, I could have it."

"All is in that," murmured he. "Widow Lerouge possessed some important secret, which persons rich and powerful had the strongest motives for concealing. She had them in her power, and that was her fortune. She made them sing to her tune; she probably went too far, and so they suppressed her. But of what nature was this secret, and how did she become possessed of it? Most likely she was in her youth a servant in some great family; and while there, she saw, heard, or discovered something. What? Evidently there is a woman at the bottom of it. Did she assist her mistress in some love intrigue? What more probable? And in that case the affair becomes even more complicated. Not only must the woman be found but her lover also; for it is the lover who has moved in this affair. He is, or I am greatly deceived, a man of noble birth. A person of inferior rank would have simply hired an assassin. This man has not hung back; he himself has struck the blow, and by that means avoiding the indiscretion or the stupidity of an accomplice. He is a courageous rascal, full of audacity and coolness, for the crime has been admirably executed. The fellow left nothing behind of a nature to compromise him seriously. But for me, Gevrol, believing in the robbery, would have seen nothing. Fortunately, however, I was there. . . . But yet it can be hardly that," continued the old man. "It must be

something worse than a mere love affair." Old Tabaret entered the porch of the house. The concierge, seated by the window of his lodge, saw him as he passed beneath the gas-lamp. "Ah," said he, "the proprietor has returned at last."

"So he has," replied his wife, "but it looks as though his princess would have nothing to do with him to-night. He seems more loose than ever."

"Is it not positively indecent?" said the concierge, "and isn't he in a state! His fair ones do treat him well! One of these fine mornings I shall have to take him to a lunatic asylum in a strait waistcoat."

"Look at him now!" interrupted his wife, "just look at him now, in the middle of the courtyard!"

The old fellow had stopped at the extremity of the porch. He had taken off his hat, and, while talking to himself, gesticulated violently. "No," said he, "I have not yet got hold of the clue, I am getting near it; but have not yet found it out."

He mounted the staircase, and rang his bell, forgetting that he had his latch-key in his pocket. His housekeeper opened the door. "What, is it you, sir," said she, "and at this hour!"

"What's that you say?" asked the old fellow.

"I say," replied the housekeeper, "that it is more than half-past eight o'clock. I thought you were not coming back this evening. Have you at least dined?"

"No, not yet."

"Well, fortunately I have kept your dinner warm. You can sit down to it at once."

Old Tabaret took his place at the table, and helped himself to soup, but mounting his hobby-horse again, he forgot to eat, and remained, his spoon in the air, as though suddenly struck by an idea.

"He is certainly touched in the head," thought Manette, the housekeeper. "Look at that stupid expression. Who in his senses would lead the life he does?" She touched him on the shoulder, and blawled in his ear, as if he were deaf: "You do not eat. Are you not hungry?"

"Yes, yes," muttered he, trying mechanically to escape the voice that sounded in his ears, "I am very hungry, for since the morning I have been obliged—" He interrupted himself, remaining with his mouth open, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"You were obliged—" repeated Manette.

"Thunder!" cried he, raising his clenched fists toward the ceiling—"heaven's thunder! I have it!"

His movement was so violent and sudden that the house-keeper was a little alarmed, and retired to the further end of the dining-room, near the door. "Yes," continued he, "it is certain there is a child!"

Manette approached him quickly. "A child?" she asked in astonishment.

"What next!" cried he in a furious tone. "What are you doing there? Has your hardihood come to this that you pick up the words which escape me? Do me the pleasure to retire to your kitchen, and stay there until I call you."

"He is going crazy!" thought Manette, as she disappeared very quickly.

Old Tabaret resumed his seat. He hastily swallowed his soup which was completely cold. "Why," said he to himself, "did I not think of it before? Poor humanity! I am growing old, and my brain is worn out. For it is clear as day; the circumstances all point to that conclusion." He rang the bell placed on the table beside him; the servant reappeared. "Bring the roast," he said, "and leave me to myself."

"Yes," continued he, furiously carving a leg of *presale* mutton—"yes, there is a child, and here is his history! Widow Lerouge is in the service of a great lady, immensely rich. Her husband, a sailor probably, departs on a long voyage. The lady, who has a lover, finds herself enceinte. She confides in Widow Lerouge, and with her assistance is clandestinely confined."

He rang again. "Manette, bring the dessert, and then leave the room!"

Certainly such a master was unworthy of so excellent a cook. He would have been puzzled to say what he had eaten for his dinner, or even what he was eating at that moment; it was some preserved pears.

"But the child; what has become of the child?" murmured he. "Has it been destroyed? No; for Widow Lerouge, an accomplice in an infanticide, would be no longer formidable. The lover wished it to live, and it was confided to the care of our widow, by whom it has been reared. They have been able to take the child from her, but not the proofs of its birth and its existence. That's what bothered them. The father is the man with the fine carriage; the mother is no other than the woman

who came with the handsome young man. Ha! ha! I can well believe the dear old dame wanted for nothing! Some secrets are worth a farm in Brie. Two persons to fleece. It is true, though, that indulging in a lover, her expenses were bound to increase every year. Poor humanity! the heart has its wants. She turned the screw too much and it broke. She has threatened. They have been frightened, and said: 'Let's put a stop to it!' But who has been charged with the commission? The papa? No; he is too old. It is the son! of course. He wished to save his mother, the pretty boy! He has killed the widow and burned the proofs!"

Manette all this time had her ear to the keyhole, and listened intently. From time to time she gleaned a word, an oath, the noise of a blow upon the table; but that was all. "For certain," thought she, "he is worried about his women. They want him to believe he is a father." Her curiosity so overcame her prudence that, being no longer able to withstand the temptation, she ventured to open the door a little way. "Did you call for your coffee, sir?" she stammered timidly.

"No, but you may bring it to me," replied old Tabaret. He attempted to swallow it at a gulp, but scalded himself so severely that the pain brought him suddenly from speculation to reality.

"Thunder!" growled he: "but it is hot! Devil take the case! it has set me beside myself. They are right when they say I am too enthusiastic. But who among the whole lot of them could have, by the sole exercise of observation and reason, established the whole history of the assassination? Certainly not Gevrol, poor man! Won't he feel vexed and humiliated, being altogether out of it. Shall I seek M. Daburon? No, not yet. The night is necessary to me to sift to the bottom all the particulars, and arrange my ideas systematically. But, on the other hand, if I sit here all alone, this confounded case will keep me in a fever of speculation, and as I have just eaten a great deal, I may get an attack of indigestion. My faith! I will call upon Madame Gerdy: she has been ailing for some days past. I will have a chat with Noel, and that will change the course of my ideas." He got up from the table, put on his overcoat, and took his hat and cane.

"Are you going out, sir?" asked Manette.

"Yes."

"Shall you be late?"

"Possibly."

"But you will return to-night?"

"I do not know." One minute later, M. Tabaret was ringing his friend's bell.

Madame Gerdy lived in respectable style. She possessed sufficient for her wants; and her son's practise, already large, had made them almost rich. She lived very quietly, and with the exception of one or two friends, whom Noel occasionally invited to dinner, received very few visitors. During more than fifteen years that M. Tabaret came familiarly to the apartments, he had only met the cure of the parish, one of Noel's old professors, and Madame Gerdy's brother, a retired colonel. When these three visitors happened to call on the same evening, an event somewhat rare, they played at a round game called Boston; on other evenings piquet or all-fours was the rule. Noel, however, seldom remained in the drawing-room, but shut himself up after dinner in his study, which with his bedroom formed a separate apartment to his mother's, and immersed himself in his law papers. He was supposed to work far into the night. Often in winter his lamp was not extinguished before dawn. Mother and son absolutely lived for one another, as all who knew them took pleasure in repeating. They loved and honored Noel for the care he bestowed upon his mother, for his more than filial devotion, for the sacrifices which all supposed he made in living at his age like an old man. The neighbors were in the habit of contrasting the conduct of this exemplary young man with that of M. Tabaret, the incorrigible old rake, the hairless dangler. As for Madame Gerdy, she saw nothing but her son in all the world. Her love had actually taken the form of worship. In Noel she believed she saw united all the physical and moral perfections. To her he seemed of a superior order to the rest of humanity. If he spoke, she was silent and listened: his word was a command, his advice a decree of Providence. To care for her son, study his tastes, anticipate his wishes, was the sole aim of her life. She was a mother.

"Is Madame Gerdy visible?" asked old Tabaret of the girl who opened the door; and, without waiting for an answer, he walked into the room like a man assured that his presence can not be inopportune, and ought to be agreeable.

A single candle lighted the drawing-room, which was not in its accustomed order. The small marble-top table, usually in the middle of the room, had been rolled into a corner. Madame

Gerdy's large armchair was near the window; a newspaper, all crumpled, lay before it on the carpet. The amateur detective took in the whole at a glance. "Has any accident happened?" he asked of the girl.

"Do not speak of it, sir: we have just had a fright! oh, such a fright!"

"What was it? Tell me quickly!"

"You know that madame has been ailing for the last month. She has eaten I may say almost nothing. This morning, even, she said to me—"

"Yes, yes! but this evening?"

"After her dinner, madame went into the drawing-room as usual. She sat down and took up one of M. Noel's newspapers. Scarcely had she begun to read, when she uttered a great cry—oh, a terrible cry! We hastened to her; madame had fallen on to the floor, as one dead, M. Noel raised her in his arms, and carried her into her room. I wanted to fetch the doctor, sir, but he said there was no need; he knew what was the matter with her."

"And how is she now?"

"She has come to her senses; that is to say, I suppose so; for M. Noel made me leave the room. All that I do know is, that a little while ago she was talking, and talking very loudly too, for I heard her. Ah, sir, it is all the same, very strange?"

"What is strange?"

"What I heard Madame Gerdy say to M. Noel."

"Ah, ha! my girl!" sneered old Tabaret; "so you listen at keyholes, do you?"

"No, sir, I assure you; but madame cried out like one lost. She said—"

"My girl!" interrupted old Tabaret severely, "one always hears wrong through keyholes. Ask Manette if that is not so."

The poor girl, thoroughly confused, sought to excuse herself.

"Enough, enough!" said the old man. "Return to your work: you need not disturb M. Noel; I can wait for him very well here."

And satisfied with the reproof he had administered, he picked up the newspaper, and seated himself beside the fire, placing the candle near him so as to read with ease. A minute had scarcely elapsed when he in his turn bounded in his chair, and stifled a cry of instinctive terror and surprise. These were the first words that met his eye:

"A horrible crime has plunged the village of La Jonchere in consternation. A poor widow, named Lerouge, who enjoyed the general esteem and love of the community, has been assassinated in her home. The officers of the law have made the usual preliminary investigations, and everything leads us to believe that the police are already on the track of the author of this dastardly crime."

"Thunder!" said old Tabaret to himself, "can it be that Madame Gerdy—?" The idea but flashed across his mind; he fell back into his chair, and, shrugging his shoulders, murmured: "Really, this affair of La Jonchere is driving me out of my senses! I can think of nothing but this Widow Lerouge. I shall be seeing her in everything now." An uncontrollable curiosity caused him to peruse the entire paper. He found nothing, however, with the exception of those lines, to justify or explain a fainting fit, a cry, or even the slightest emotion.

"This coincidence is extremely singular," thought the incorrigible police agent. Then, noticing that the newspaper was slightly torn at the lower part, and crumpled, as if by a convulsive grasp, he repeated: "It is very strange!"

At this moment the door of Madame Gerdy's bedroom opened, and Noel appeared on the threshold. Without doubt the accident to his mother had greatly excited him; for he was very pale, and his countenance, ordinarily so calm, wore an expression of great worry. He appeared surprised to see M. Tabaret.

"Ah, my dear Noel!" cried the old fellow. "Ease my anxiety. How is your mother?"

"Madame Gerdy is as well as can be expected."

"Madame Gerdy!" repeated the old fellow with an air of astonishment; then he continued: "It is plain you have been seriously alarmed."

"In truth," replied the barrister, seating himself, "I have experienced a rude shock."

Noel was visibly making the greatest effort to appear calm, to listen to the old fellow, and to answer him. M. Tabaret, full of anxiety, perceived nothing. "At least, my dear boy," said he, "tell me how this happened!"

The young man hesitated a moment, as if debating with himself. No doubt he was unprepared for this point-blank question, and knew not what answer to make; at last he replied: "Madame Gerdy has received a severe blow in learning from



a paragraph in this paper that a woman in whom she took a strong interest has been murdered."

"Well, I never!" cried old Tabaret.

The old fellow was so astonished that he almost betrayed himself and revealed his connection with the police. He was on the point of saying: "What! your mother knew the Widow Lerouge?" By an effort he restrained himself. He had more trouble to hide his satisfaction, for he was delighted to find himself so unexpectedly on the trace of the antecedents of the victim of La Jonchere.

"She was," continued Noel, "the slave of Madame Gerdy, devoted to her in every way! She would have sacrificed herself for her at a sign from her hand."

"Then you, my dear friend, you knew this poor woman!"

"I had not seen her for a very long time," replied Noel, whose voice seemed broken by emotion; "but I knew her well. I ought even to say I loved her tenderly. She was my nurse."

"She, this woman?" stammered old Tabaret.

This time he was thunderstruck. Widow Lerouge Noel's nurse? He was most fortunate. Providence had evidently chosen him for its instrument, and was leading him by the hand. He was about to obtain all the information, which half an hour ago he had almost despaired of procuring. He remained seated before Noel, amazed and speechless. Yet he understood that, unless he would compromise himself, he must speak. "It is a great misfortune," he murmured at last.

"What it is for Madame Gerdy, I can not say," replied Noel with a gloomy air; "but for me it is an overwhelming misfortune! I am struck to the heart by the blow which has slain this poor woman. Her death, M. Tabaret, has annihilated all my dreams of the future, and probably overthrown my most cherished hopes. I had to avenge myself for cruel injuries; her death breaks the weapon in my hands, and reduces me to despair, to impotence. Alas! I am indeed unfortunate."

"You unfortunate?" cried old Tabaret, singularly affected by his dear Noel's sadness. "In heaven's name, what has happened to you?"

"I suffer," murmured the barrister, "and very cruelly. Not only do I fear that the injustice is irreparable; but here am I totally without defense delivered over to the shafts of calumny. I may be accused of inventing falsehood, of being

an ambitious intriguer, having no regard for truth, no scruples of conscience."

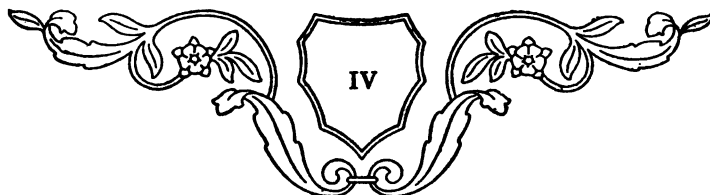
Old Tabaret was puzzled. What connection could possibly exist between Noel's honor and the assassination at La Jonchere? His brain was in a whirl. A thousand troubled and confused ideas jostled one another in inextricable confusion. "Come, come, Noel," said he, "compose yourself. Who would believe any calumny uttered about you? Take courage, have you not friends? am I not here? Have confidence, tell me what troubles you, and it will be strange, indeed, if between us two—"

The barrister started to his feet, impressed by a sudden resolution.

"Well! yes," interrupted he; "yes, you shall know all. In fact, I am tired of carrying all alone a secret that is stifling me. The part I have been playing irritates and wearies me. I have need of a friend to console me. I require a counselor whose voice will encourage me, for one is a bad judge of his own cause, and this crime has plunged me into an abyss of hesitations."

"You know," replied M. Tabaret kindly, "that I regard you as my own son. Do not scruple to let me serve you."

"Know then," commenced the barrister—"but no, not here: what I have to say must not be overheard. Let us go into my study."



**W**HEN Noel and old Tabaret were seated face to face in Noel's study, and the door had been carefully shut, the old fellow felt uneasy, and said: "What if your mother should require anything."

"If Madame Gerdy rings," replied the young man dryly, "the servant will attend to her."

This indifference, this cold disdain, amazed old Tabaret, accustomed as he was to the affectionate relations always existing between mother and son. "For heaven's sake, Noel," said he,

"calm yourself. Do not allow yourself to be overcome by a feeling of irritation. You have, I see, some little pique against your mother, which you will have forgotten to-morrow. Don't speak of her in this icy tone; but tell me what you mean by calling her Madame Gerdy."

"What I mean?" rejoined the barrister in a hollow tone; "what I mean?" Then rising from his armchair, he took several strides about the room, and, returning to his place near the old fellow, said: "Because, M. Tabaret, Madame Gerdy is not my mother!"

This sentence fell like a heavy blow on the head of the amateur detective. "Oh!" he said in the tone one assumes when rejecting an absurd proposition, "do you really know what you are saying, Noel? Is it credible? Is it probable?"

"It is improbable," replied Noel with a peculiar emphasis which was habitual to him; "it is incredible, if you will, but yet it is true. That is to say, for thirty-three years, ever since my birth, this woman has played a most marvelous and unworthy comedy, to ennoble and enrich her son—for she has a son—at my expense!"

"My friend," commenced old Tabaret, who in the background of the picture presented by this singular revelation saw again the phantom of the murdered Widow Lerouge.

But Noel heard not, and seemed hardly in a state to hear. The young man, usually so cold, so self-contained, could no longer control his anger. At the sound of his own voice he became more and more animated, as a good horse might at the jingling of his harness. "Was ever man," continued he, "more cruelly deceived, more miserably duped, than I have been? I, who loved this woman, who knew not how to show my affection for her, who, for her sake, sacrificed my youth! How she must have laughed at me! Her infamy dates from the moment when for the first time she took me on her knees; and, until these few days past, she has sustained without faltering her execrable role. Her love for me was nothing but hypocrisy! her devotion, falsehood! her caresses, lies! And I adored her! Ah! why can I not take back all the embraces I bestowed on her in exchange for her Judas kisses? And for what was all this heroism of deception, this caution, this duplicity? To betray me more securely, to despoil me, to rob me, to give to her bastard all that lawfully appertained to me: my name, a noble name, my fortune, a princely inheritance!"

"We are getting near it!" thought old Tabaret, who was fast relapsing into the colleague of M. Gevrol; then aloud he said: "This is very serious, all that you have been saying, my dear Noel, terribly serious. We must believe Madame Gerdy possessed of an amount of audacity and ability rarely to be met with in a woman. She must have been assisted, advised, compelled perhaps. Who have been her accomplices? She could never have managed this unaided; perhaps her husband himself."

"Her husband!" interrupted the barrister with a laugh. "Ah! you too have believed her a widow. Pshaw! She never had a husband; the defunct Gerdy never existed. I was a bastard, dear M. Tabaret, very much a bastard; Noel, son of the girl Gerdy and an unknown father!"

"Ah!" cried the old fellow; "that, then, was the reason why your marriage with Mademoiselle Levernois was broken off four years ago?"

"Yes, my friend, that was the reason. And what misfortunes might have been averted by this marriage with a young girl whom I loved! However, I did not complain to her whom I then called my mother. She wept, she accused herself, she seemed ready to die of grief; and I, poor fool! I consoled her as best I could; I dried her tears and excused her in her own eyes. No, there was no husband. Do such women as she have husbands? She was my father's mistress; and on the day when he had had enough of her, he took up his hat and threw her three hundred thousand francs, the price of the pleasures she had given him."

Noel would probably have continued much longer to pour forth his furious denunciations, but M. Tabaret stopped him. The old fellow felt he was on the point of learning a history in every way similar to that which he had imagined; and his impatience to know whether he had guessed aright almost caused him to forget to express any sympathy for his friend's misfortunes.

"My dear boy," said he, "do not let us digress. You ask me for advice; and I am perhaps the best adviser you could have chosen. Come, then, to the point. How have you learned this? Have you any proofs? where are they?"

The decided tone in which the old fellow spoke should, no doubt, have awakened Noel's attention; but he did not notice it. He had not leisure to reflect. He therefore answered:

"I have known the truth for three weeks past. I made the discovery by chance. I have important moral proofs, but they are mere presumptive evidence. A word from Widow Lerouge, one single word, would have rendered them decisive. This word she can not now pronounce, since they have killed her; but she had said it to me. Now Madame Gerdy will deny all. I know her; with her head on the block she will deny it. My father doubtless will turn against me. I am certain, and I possess proofs; now this crime makes my certitude but a vain boast, and renders my proofs null and void!"

"Explain it all to me," said old Tabaret after a pause—"all, you understand. We old ones are sometimes able to give good advice. We will decide what's to be done afterward."

"Three weeks ago," commenced Noel, "searching for some old documents, I opened Madame Gerdy's secretary. Accidentally I displaced one of the small shelves: some papers tumbled out, and a packet of letters fell in front of my eyes. A mechanical impulse, which I can not explain, prompted me to untie the string, and, impelled by an invincible curiosity, I read the first letter which came to my hand."

"You did wrong," remarked M. Tabaret.

"Be it so; anyhow, I read. At the end of ten lines I was convinced that these letters were from my father, whose name, Madame Gerdy, in spite of my prayers, had always hidden from me. You can understand my emotion. I carried off the packet, shut myself up in this room, and devoured the correspondence from beginning to end."

"And you have been cruelly punished, my poor boy!"

"It is true; but who in my position could have resisted? These letters have given me great pain; but they afford the proof of what I just now told you."

"You have at least preserved these letters?"

"I have them here, M. Tabaret," replied Noel, "and, that you may understand the case in which I have requested your advice, I am going to read them to you."

The barrister opened one of the drawers of his bureau, pressed an invisible spring, and from a hidden receptacle constructed in the thick upper shelf he drew out a bundle of letters. "You understand, my friend," he resumed, "that I will spare you all insignificant details, which, however, add their own weight to the rest. I am only going to deal with the more important facts, treating directly of the affair."

Old Tabaret nestled in his armchair, burning with curiosity; his face and his eyes expressing the most anxious attention. After a selection, which he was some time in making, the barrister opened a letter and commenced reading in a voice which trembled at times, in spite of his efforts to render it calm.

"My dearly loved Valerie—Valerie," said he, "is Madame Gerdy."

"I know, I know. Do not interrupt yourself."

Noel then resumed.

"My dearly loved Valerie:

"This is a happy day. This morning I received your darling letter; I have covered it with kisses, I have reread it a hundred times; and now it has gone to join the others, here upon my heart. This letter, oh, my love! has nearly killed me with joy. You were not deceived then; it was true! Heaven has blessed our love. We shall have a son.

"I shall have a son, the living image of my adored Valerie! Oh! why are we separated by such an immense distance? Why have I not wings, that I might fly to your feet and fall into your arms, full of the sweetest voluptuousness! No! never as at this moment have I cursed the fatal union imposed upon me by an inexorable family, whom my tears could not move.

"I can not help hating this woman, who, in spite of me, bears my name, innocent victim though she is of the barbarity of our parents. And, to complete my misery, she too will soon render me a father. Who can describe my sorrow when I compare the fortunes of these two children?

"The one, the son of the object of my tenderest love, will have neither father nor family, nor even a name, since a law framed to make lovers unhappy prevents my acknowledging him. While the other, the son of my detested wife, by the sole fact of his birth, will be rich, noble, surrounded by devotion and homage, with a great position in the world. I can not bear the thought of this terrible injustice! How it is to be prevented, I do not know; but rest assured I shall find a way. It is to him who is the most desired, the most cherished, the most beloved, that the greater fortunes should come; and come to him it shall, for I so will it."

"From where is that letter dated?" asked old Tabaret. The style in which it was written had already settled one point in his mind.

"See," replied Noel. He handed the letter to the old fellow, who read: "Venice, December, 1828."

"You perceive," resumed the barrister, "all the importance of this first letter. It is like a brief statement of the facts. My father, married in spite of himself, adores his mistress and detests his wife. Both find themselves enceinte at the same time, and his feelings toward the two infants about to be born are not at all concealed. Toward the end one almost sees peeping forth the germ of the idea which later on he will not be afraid to put into execution, in defiance of all law, human or divine!"

He was speaking as though pleading the cause, when old Tabaret interrupted him. "It is not necessary to explain it," said he. "Thank goodness, what you have just read is explicit enough. I am not an adept in such matters, I am as simple as a jurymen; however, I understand it admirably so far."

"I pass over several letters," continued Noel, "and I come to this one, dated January 23, 1829. It is very long, and filled with matters altogether foreign to the subject which now occupies us. However, it contains two passages, which attest the slow but steady growth of my father's project. 'A destiny more powerful than my will, chains me to this country; but my soul is with you, my Valerie! Without ceasing, my thoughts rest upon the adored pledge of our love which moves within you. Take care, my darling, take care of yourself, now doubly precious. It is the lover, the father, who implores you. The last part of your letter wounds my heart. Is it not an insult to me for you to express anxiety as to the future of our child? Oh, heaven! she loves me, she knows me, and yet she doubts!'

"I skip," said Noel, "two pages of passionate rhapsody, and stop at these few lines at the end. 'The comtesse's condition causes her to suffer very much! Unfortunate wife! I hate and at the same time pity her. She seems to divine the reason of my sadness and my coldness. By her timid submission and unalterable sweetness one would think she sought pardon for our unhappy union. Poor, sacrificed creature! She also may have given her heart to another before being dragged to the altar. Our fates would then be the same. Your good heart will pardon my pitying her.'

"That one was my mother," cried the barrister in a trembling voice. "A saint! And he asks pardon for the pity she

inspires! Poor woman." He passed his hands over his eyes, as if to force back his tears, and added: "She is dead!"

In spite of his impatience, old Tabaret dared not utter a word. Besides, he felt keenly the profound sorrow of his young friend, and respected it. After a rather long silence, Noel raised his head, and returned to the correspondence.

"All the letters which follow," said he, "carry traces of the preoccupation of my father's mind on the subject of his bastard son. I lay them, however, aside. But this is what strikes me in the one written from Rome, on March 5, 1829. 'My son, our son, that is my great, my only anxiety. How to secure for him the future position of which I dream? The nobles of former times were not worried in this way. In those days I would have gone to the king, who, with a word, would have assured the child's position in the world. To-day the king who governs with difficulty his disaffected subjects can do nothing. The nobility has lost its rights, and the highest in the land are treated the same as the meanest peasants!' Lower down I find: 'My heart loves to picture to itself the likeness of our son. He will have the spirit, the mind, the beauty, the grace, all the fascinations of his mother. He will inherit from his father, pride, valor, and the sentiments of a noble race. And the other, what will he be like? I tremble to think of it. Hatred can only engender a monster. Heaven reserves strength and beauty for the children of love!' The monster, that is I!" said the barrister with intense rage. "While the other— But let us ignore these preliminaries to an outrageous action. I only desired up to the present to show you the aberration of my father's reason under the influence of his passion. We shall soon come to the point."

M. Tabaret was astonished at the strength of this passion, of which Noel was disturbing the ashes. Perhaps he felt it all the more keenly on account of those expressions which recalled his own youth. He understood how irresistible must have been the strength of such a love; and he trembled to speculate as to the result.

"Here is," resumed Noel, holding up a sheet of paper, "not one of those interminable epistles from which I have read you short extracts, but a simple billet. It is dated from Venice at the beginning of May; it is short but nevertheless decisive: 'Dear Valerie—Tell me, as near as possible, the probable date of your confinement. I await your reply with an anxiety you



would imagine could you but guess my projects with regard to our child!

"I do not know," said Noel, "whether Madame Gerdy understood; anyhow she must have answered at once, for this is what my father wrote on the 14th: 'Your reply, my darling, is what I did not dare expect it to be. The project I had conceived is now practicable. I begin to feel more calm and secure. Our son shall bear my name; I shall not be obliged to separate myself from him. He shall be reared by my side, in my mansion, under my eyes, on my knees, in my arms. Shall I have strength enough to bear this excess of happiness? I have a soul for grief, shall I have one for joy? Oh! my adored one, oh! my precious child, fear nothing, my heart is vast enough to love you both! I set out to-morrow for Naples, from whence I shall write to you at length. Happen what may, however, though I should have to sacrifice the important interests confided to me, I shall be in Paris for the critical hour. My presence will double your courage; the strength of my love will diminish your sufferings.'"

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, Noel," said old Tabaret, "do you know what important affairs detained your father abroad?"

"My father, my old friend," replied the barrister, "was, in spite of his youth, one of the friends, one of the confidants, of Charles X; and he had been entrusted by him with a secret mission to Italy. My father is Comte Rheteau de Commarin."

"Whew!" exclaimed the old fellow; and the better to engrave the name upon his memory, he repeated several times, between his teeth, "Rheteau de Commarin."

For a few minutes Noel remained silent. After having appeared to do everything to control his resentment, he seemed utterly dejected, as though he had formed the determination to attempt nothing to repair the injury he had sustained. "In the middle of the month of May, then," he continued, "my father is at Naples. It is while there that he, a man of prudence and sense, a dignified diplomatist, a nobleman, prompted by an insensate passion, dares to confide to paper this most monstrous of projects. Listen! 'My adored one—It is Germain, my old valet, who will hand you this letter. I am sending him to Normandy, charged with a commission of the most delicate nature. He is one of those servitors who may be trusted implicitly. The time has come for me to explain to you my projects respect-

ing my son. In three weeks, at the latest, I shall be in Paris. If my previsions are not deceived, the comtesse and you will be confined at the same time. An interval of three or four days will not alter my plan. This is what I have resolved. My two children will be entrusted to two nurses of N——, where my estates are nearly all situated. One of these women, known to Germain, and to whom I am sending him, will be in our interests. It is to this person, Valerie, that our son will be confided. These two women will leave Paris the same day, Germain accompanying her who will have charge of the son of the comtesse. An accident, devised beforehand, will compel these two women to pass one night on the road. Germain will arrange so they will have to sleep in the same inn and in the same chamber! During the night our nurse will change the infants in their cradles. I have foreseen everything, as I will explain to you, and every precaution has been taken to prevent our secret from escaping. Germain has instructions to procure, while in Paris, two sets of baby linen exactly similar. Assist him with your advice.

"Your maternal heart, my sweet Valerie, may perhaps bleed at the thought of being deprived of the innocent caresses of your child. You will console yourself by thinking of the position secured to him by your sacrifice. What excess of tenderness can serve him as powerfully as this separation? As to the other, I know your fond heart, you will cherish him. Will it not be another proof of your love for me? Besides, he will have nothing to complain of. Knowing nothing, he will have nothing to regret; and all that money can secure in this world he shall have. Do not tell me that this attempt is criminal. No, my well beloved, no. The success of our plan depends upon so many unlikely circumstances, so many coincidences, independent of our will, that, without the evident protection of Providence, we can not succeed. If, then, success crowns our efforts, it will be because heaven decreed it. Meanwhile I hope."

"Just what I expected," murmured old Tabaret.

"And the wretched man," cried Noel, "dares to invoke the aid of Providence! He would make heaven his accomplice!"

"But," asked the old fellow, "how did your mother—pardon me, I would say, how did Madame Gerdy receive this proposition?"

"She would appear to have rejected it at first, for here are

twenty pages of eloquent persuasion from the comte, urging her to agree to it, trying to convince her. Oh, that woman!"

"Come, my child," said M. Tabaret softly, "try not to be too unjust. You seem to direct all your resentment against Madame Gerdy. Really, in my opinion, the comte is far more deserving of your anger than she is."

"True," interrupted Noel, with a certain degree of violence—"true, the comte is guilty, very guilty. He is the author of the infamous conspiracy, and yet I feel no hatred against him. He has committed a crime, but he has an excuse, his passion. Moreover, my father has not deceived me, like this miserable woman, every hour of my life, during thirty years. Besides, M. de Commarin has been so cruelly punished that, at the present moment, I can only pardon and pity him."

"Ah! so he has been punished?" interrogated the old fellow.

"Yes, fearfully, as you will admit. But allow me to continue. Toward the end of May, or, rather, during the first days of June, the comte must have arrived in Paris, for the correspondence ceases. He saw Madame Gerdy, and the final arrangements of the conspiracy were decided on. Here is a note which removes all uncertainty on that point. On the day it was written the comte was on service at the Tuileries, and unable to leave his post. He has written it even in the king's study, on the king's paper; see the royal arms! The bargain has been concluded, and the woman who has consented to become the instrument of my father's projects is in Paris. He informs his mistress of the fact. 'Dear Valerie—Germain informs me of the arrival of your son's, our son's, nurse. She will call at your house during the day. She is to be depended upon; a magnificent recompense insures her discretion. Do not, however, mention our plans to her; for she has been given to understand that you know nothing. I wish to charge myself with the sole responsibility of the deed; it is more prudent. This woman is a native of N——. She was born on our estate, almost in our house. Her husband is a brave and honest sailor. Her name is Claudine Lerouge. Be of good courage, my dear love! I am exacting from you the greatest sacrifice that a lover can hope for from a mother. Heaven, you can no longer doubt it, protects us. Everything depends now upon our skill and our prudence, so that we are sure to succeed!'"

On one point, at least, M. Tabaret was sufficiently enlightened. The researches into the past life of Widow Lerouge were

no longer difficult. He could not restrain an exclamation of satisfaction, which passed unnoticed by Noel.

"This note," resumed the barrister, "closes the comte's correspondence with Madame Gerdy."

"What!" exclaimed the old fellow, "you are in possession of nothing more?"

"I have also ten lines, written many years later, which certainly have some weight, but after all are only a moral proof."

"What a misfortune!" murmured M. Tabaret. Noel laid on the bureau the letters he had held in his hand, and turning toward his old friend, he looked at him steadily.

"Suppose," said he slowly and emphasizing every syllable—"suppose that all my information ends here. We will admit, for a moment, that I know nothing more than you do now. What is your opinion?"

Old Tabaret remained some minutes without answering; he was estimating the probabilities resulting from M. de Commarin's letters. "For my own part," said he at length, "I believe on my conscience that you are not Madame Gerdy's son."

"And you are right!" answered the barrister forcibly. "You will easily believe, will you not, that I went and saw Claudine. She loved me, this poor woman who had given me her milk; she suffered from the knowledge of the injustice that had been done me. Must I say it, her complicity in the matter weighed upon her conscience; it was a remorse too great for her old age. I saw her, I interrogated her, and she told me all. The comte's scheme, simply and yet ingeniously conceived, succeeded without any effort. Three days after my birth the crime was committed, and I, poor, helpless infant, was betrayed, despoiled, and disinherited by my natural protector, by my own father! Poor Claudine! She promised me her testimony for the day on which I should reclaim my rights!"

"And she is gone, carrying her secret with her!" murmured the old fellow in a tone of regret.

"Perhaps!" replied Noel, "for I have yet one hope. Claudine had in her possession several letters which had been written to her a long time ago, some by the comte, some by Madame Gerdy, letters both imprudent and explicit. They will be found, no doubt, and their evidence will be decisive. I have held these letters in my hands, I have read them; Claudine particularly wished me to keep them; why did I not do so?"

No! there was no hope on that side, and old Tabaret knew

so better than any one. It was these very letters, no doubt, that the assassin of La Jonchere wanted. He had found them and burned them with the other papers in the little stove. The old amateur detective was beginning to understand. "All the same," said he, "from what I know of your affairs, which I think I know as well as my own, it appears to me that the comte has not overwell kept the dazzling promises of fortune he made Madame Gerdy on your behalf."

"He never even kept them in the least degree, my old friend."

"That now," cried the old fellow indignantly, "is even more infamous than all the rest."

"Do not accuse my father," answered Noel gravely; "his connection with Madame Gerdy lasted a long time. I remember a haughty looking man who used sometimes to come and see me at school, and who could be no other than the comte. But the rupture came."

"Naturally," sneered M. Tabaret, "a great nobleman—"

"Wait before judging," interrupted the barrister. "M. de Commarin had his reasons. His mistress was false to him, he learned it, and cast her off with just indignation. The ten lines which I mentioned to you were written then."

Noel searched a considerable time among the papers scattered upon the table, and at length selected a letter more faded and creased than the others. Judging from the number of folds in the paper, one could guess that it had been read and reread many times. The writing even was here and there partly obliterated. "In this," said he in a bitter tone, "Madame Gerdy is no longer the adored Valerie: 'A friend, cruel as all true friends, has opened my eyes. I doubted. You have been watched, and to-day, unhappily, I can doubt no more. You, Valerie, you to whom I have given more than my life, you deceive me and have been deceiving me for a long time past. Unhappy man that I am! I am no longer certain that I am the father of your child.'"

"But this note is a proof," cried old Tabaret; "an overwhelming proof. Of what importance to the comte would be a doubt of his paternity had he not sacrificed his legitimate son to his bastard? Yes, you have said truly, his punishment has been severe."

"Madame Gerdy," resumed Noel, "wished to justify herself. She wrote to the comte; but he returned her letters unopened. She called on him, but he would not receive her. At length

she grew tired of her useless attempts to see him. She knew that all was well over when the comte's steward brought her for me a legal settlement of fifteen thousand francs a year. The son had taken my place, and the mother had ruined me!"

Three or four light knocks at the door of the study interrupted Noel. "Who is there?" he asked without stirring.

"Sir," answered the servant from the other side of the door, "madame wishes to speak to you."

The barrister appeared to hesitate. "Go, my son," advised M. Tabaret; "do not be merciless; only bigots have that right." Noel arose with visible reluctance, and passed into Madame Gerdy's sleeping apartment.

"Poor boy!" thought M. Tabaret when left alone. "What a fatal discovery! and how he must feel it. Such a noble young man! such a brave heart! In his candid honesty he does not even suspect from whence the blow has fallen. Fortunately I am shrewd enough for two, and it is just when he despairs of justice, I am confident of obtaining it for him. Thanks to his information, I am now on the track. A child might now divine whose hand struck the blow. But how has it happened? He will tell me without knowing it. Ah! if I had one of those letters for four and twenty hours. He has probably counted them. If I ask for one, I must acknowledge my connection with the police. I had better take one, no matter which, just to verify the handwriting."

Old Tabaret had just thrust one of the letters into the depths of his capacious pocket when the barrister returned. He was one of those men of strongly formed character, who never lose their self-control. He was very cunning and had long accustomed himself to dissimulation, that indispensable armor of the ambitious. As he entered the room nothing in his manner betrayed what had taken place between Madame Gerdy and himself. He was absolutely as calm as when, seated in his arm-chair, he listened to the interminable stories of his clients.

"Well," asked old Tabaret, "how is she now?"

"Worse," answered Noel. "She is now delirious, and no longer knows what she says. She has just assailed me with the most atrocious abuse, upbraiding me as the vilest of mankind! I really believe she is going out of her mind."

"One might do so with less cause," murmured M. Tabaret; "and I think you ought to send for the doctor."

"I have just done so."

The barrister had resumed his seat before his bureau, and was rearranging the scattered letters according to their dates. He seemed to have forgotten that he had asked his old friend's advice; nor did he appear in any way desirous of renewing the interrupted conversation. This was not at all what old Tabaret wanted. "The more I ponder over your history, my dear Noel," he observed, "the more I am bewildered. I really do not know what resolution I should adopt were I in your situation."

"Yes, my old friend," replied the barrister sadly, "it is a situation that might well perplex even more profound experiences than yours."

The old amateur detective repressed with difficulty the sly smile, which for an instant hovered about his lips. "I confess it humbly," he said, taking pleasure in assuming an air of intense simplicity, "but you, what have you done? Your first impulse must have been to ask Madame Gerdy for an explanation."

Noel made a startled movement, which passed unnoticed by old Tabaret, preoccupied as he was in trying to give the turn he desired to the conversation. "It was by that," answered Noel, "that I began."

"And what did she say?"

"What could she say! Was she not overwhelmed by the discovery?"

"What! did she not attempt to exculpate herself?" inquired the detective, greatly surprised.

"Yes! she attempted the impossible. She pretended she could explain the correspondence. She told me— But can I remember what she said? Lies, absurd, infamous lies." The barrister had finished gathering up his letters, without noticing the abstraction. He tied them together carefully, and replaced them in the secret drawer of his bureau.

"Yes," continued he, rising and walking backward and forward across his study, as if the constant movement could calm his anger, "yes, she pretended she could show me I was wrong. It was easy, was it not, with the proofs I held against her? The fact is, she adores her son, and her heart is breaking at the idea that he may be obliged to restitute what he has stolen from me. And I, idiot, fool, coward, almost wished not to mention the matter to her. I said to myself: I will forgive, for after all she has loved me! Loved? No. She would see me suffer the most horrible tortures, without shedding a tear, to prevent a single hair falling from her son's head."

"She has probably warned the comte," observed old Tabaret, still pursuing his idea.

"She may have tried, but can not have succeeded, for the comte has been absent from Paris for more than a month and is not expected to return until the end of the week."

"How do you know that?"

"I wished to see the comte, my father, to speak with him—"

"You?"

"Yes, I. Do you think that I shall not reclaim my own? Do you imagine that I shall not raise my voice? On what account should I keep silent? Whom have I to consider? I have rights, and I will make them good. What do you find surprising in that?"

"Nothing, certainly, my friend. So then you called at M. de Commarin's house?"

"Oh! I did not decide on doing so all at once," continued Noel. "At first my discovery almost drove me mad. Then I required time to reflect. A thousand opposing sentiments agitated me. At one moment, my fury blinded me; the next, my courage deserted me. I would, and I would not. I was undecided, uncertain, wild. The scandal that must arise from the publicity of such an affair terrified me. I desired, I still desire to recover my name, that much is certain. But on the eve of recovering it, I wish to preserve it from stain. I was seeking a means of arranging everything, without noise, without scandal."

"At length, however, you made up your mind?"

"Yes, after a struggle of fifteen days, fifteen days of torture, of anguish! Ah! what I suffered in that time! I neglected my business, being totally unfit for work. During the day, I tried by incessant action to fatigue my body, that at night I might find forgetfulness in sleep. Vain hope! Since I found these letters, I have not slept an hour."

From time to time, old Tabaret slyly consulted his watch. "M. Daburon will be in bed," thought he.

"At last, one morning," continued Noel, "after a night of rage, I determined to end all uncertainty. I was in that desperate state of mind, in which the gambler, after successive losses, stakes upon a card his last remaining coin. I plucked up courage, sent for a cab, and was driven to the De Commarin mansion."

The old amateur detective here allowed a sigh of satisfaction to escape him.



"It is one of the most magnificent houses in the Faubourg St. Germain, my friend, a princely dwelling, worthy a great noble twenty times a millionaire; almost a palace in fact. One enters at first a vast courtyard, to the right and left of which are the stables, containing twenty most valuable horses, and the coach-houses. At the end rises the grand facade of the main building, majestic and severe, with its immense windows, and its double flight of marble steps. Behind the house is a magnificent garden, I should say a park, shaded by the oldest trees which perhaps exist in all Paris."

This enthusiastic description was not at all what M. Tabaret wanted. But what could he do, how could he press Noel for the result of his visit! An indiscreet word might awaken the barrister's suspicions, and reveal to him that he was speaking not to a friend, but to a detective.

"Were you then shown over the house and grounds?" asked the old fellow.

"No, but I have examined them alone. Since I discovered that I was the only heir of the Rheteau de Commarins, I have found out the antecedents of my new family. I have studied our history at the Bibliotheque; it is a noble history. At night, utterly distracted, I have again and again wandered round the dwelling of my ancestors. Ah! you can not understand my emotions! 'It is there,' said I to myself, 'that I was born; there that I should have been brought up; there that I ought to reign to-day!' I tasted that awful bitterness of which banished men have died. I compared the bastard's brilliant destinies with my own sad and laborious career; and my indignation well-nigh mastered me. A mad impulse stirred me to force the doors, to rush into the principal drawing-room and drive out the intruder, the girl Gerdy's son, crying: 'Get out, bastard, get out, I am the master here!' The uncertainty of obtaining my rights whenever I wished alone restrained me. Oh! yes, I know it well, this dwelling of my ancestors! I love its old sculptures, its grand old trees, even the flagstones of the courtyard worn by the footsteps of my mother! I love all; especially the proud escutcheon, which frowns down from above the principal entrance and flings a haughty defiance to the stupid theories of this age of levelers."

This last phrase contrasted so strongly with the opinions usually expressed by the young barrister that M. Tabaret was obliged to turn away his head to conceal his amusement.

"Poor humanity!" thought he. "He sees himself a grand lord already."

"When I arrived," resumed Noel, "a Swiss porter, dressed in a gorgeous livery, was standing at the door. I asked to see the Comte de Commarin. The Swiss replied that the comte was traveling, but that the vicomte was at home. This interfered with my plans; however, as I had gone so far, I insisted on speaking to the son in default of the father. The Swiss stared at me with astonishment. He had seen me alight from a hired vehicle and so deliberated with himself for some moments as to whether I was not too insignificant a person to have the honor of appearing before the vicomte."

"However, you were able to speak with him?"

"What, like that, all at once!" replied the barrister in a tone of bitter raillery; "can you possibly think so, my dear M. Tabaret! The inspection, however, was favorable to me; my white cravat and black clothes produced an effect. The Swiss entrusted me to the guidance of a huntsman with a plumed hat, who led the way across the courtyard to a superb vestibule, where five or six footmen were lolling and gaping on their seats. One of these gentlemen asked me to follow him. He led me up a spacious staircase, wide enough for a carriage to ascend, preceded me along an extensive picture gallery, guided me across vast apartments, the furniture of which was fading under its coverings, and finally delivered me into the hands of M. Albert's valet. That is the name by which Madame Gerdy's son is known, that is to say, my name."

"I understand, I understand."

"I had passed an inspection; now I had to undergo an examination. The valet desired to be informed who I was, whence I came, what was my profession, what I wanted, and all the rest. I answered simply that, quite unknown to the vicomte, I desired five minutes' conversation with him on a matter of importance. He left me, requesting me to sit down and wait. I had waited more than a quarter of an hour, when he reappeared. His master graciously deigned to receive me."

It was easy to perceive that the barrister's reception rankled in his breast, and that he considered it an insult. He could not forgive Albert his lackeys and his valet. He forgot the words of the illustrious duke, who said: "I pay my lackeys to be insolent, to save myself the trouble and ridicule of being so." Old Tabaret was surprised at his young friend's display of bitter-

ness, in speaking of these trivial details. "What narrow-mindedness," thought he, "for a man of such intelligence! Can it be true that the arrogance of lackeys is the secret of the people's hatred of an amiable and polite aristocracy?"

"I was ushered into a small apartment," continued Noel, "simply furnished, the only ornaments of which were weapons. These, ranged against the walls, were of all times and countries. Never have I seen in so small a space so many muskets, pistols, swords, sabres, and foils. One might have imagined himself in a fencing master's arsenal."

The weapon used by Widow Lerouge's assassin naturally recurred to the old fellow's memory.

"The vicomte," said Noel, speaking slowly, "was half lying on a divan when I entered. He was dressed in a velvet jacket and loose trousers of the same material, and had around his neck an immense white silk scarf. I do not cherish any resentment against this young man; he has never to his knowledge injured me: he was in ignorance of our father's crime; I am therefore able to speak of him with justice. He is handsome, bears himself well, and nobly carries the name which does not belong to him. He is about my height, of the same dark complexion, and would resemble me, perhaps, if he did not wear a beard. Only he looks five or six years younger; but this is readily explained, he has neither worked, struggled, nor suffered. He is one of the fortunate ones who arrive without having to start, or who traverse life's road on such soft cushions that they are never injured by the jolting of their carriage. On seeing me, he arose and saluted me graciously."

"You must have been dreadfully excited," remarked old Tabaret.

"Less than I am at this moment. Fifteen preparatory days of mental torture exhausts one's emotions. I answered the question I saw upon his lips. 'Sir,' said I, 'you do not know me; but that is of little consequence. I come to you, charged with a very grave, a very sad mission, which touches the honor of the name you bear.' Without doubt he did not believe me, for, in an impertinent tone, he asked me: 'Shall you be long?' I answered simply: 'Yes.'"

"Pray," interrupted old Tabaret, now become very attentive, "do not omit a single detail; it may be very important, you understand."

"The vicomte," continued Noel, "appeared very much put

out. 'The fact is,' he explained, 'I had already disposed of my time. This is the hour at which I call on the young lady to whom I am engaged, Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Can we not postpone this conversation?'

"Good! another woman!" said the old fellow to himself.

"I answered the vicomte that an explanation would admit of no delay; and, as I saw him prepare to dismiss me, I drew from my pocket the comte's correspondence, and presented one of the letters to him. On recognizing his father's handwriting, he became more tractable, declared himself at my service, and asked permission to write a word of apology to the lady by whom he was expected. Having hastily written the note, he handed it to his valet, and ordered him to send it at once to Madame d'Arlange. He then asked me to pass into the next room, which was his library."

"One word," interrupted the old fellow; "was he troubled on seeing the letters?"

"Not the least in the world. After carefully closing the door, he pointed to a chair, seated himself, and said: 'Now, sir, explain yourself.' I had had time to prepare myself for this interview while waiting in the anteroom. I had decided to go straight to the point. 'Sir,' said I, 'my mission is painful. The facts I am about to reveal to you are incredible. I beg you, do not answer me until you have read the letters I have here. I beseech you, above all, to keep calm.' He looked at me with an air of extreme surprise, and answered: 'Speak! I can hear all.' I stood up, and said: 'Sir, I must inform you that you are not the legitimate son of M. de Commarin, as this correspondence will prove to you. The legitimate son exists; and he it is who sends me.' I kept my eyes on his while speaking, and I saw there a passing gleam of fury. For a moment I thought he was about to spring at my throat. He soon recovered himself. 'The letters,' said he in a short tone. I handed them to him."

"How!" cried old Tabaret, "these letters—the true ones? How imprudent!"

"And why?"

"If he had—I don't know; but—" the old fellow hesitated.

The barrister laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder. "I was there," said he in a hollow tone; "and I promise you the letters were in no danger."

Noel's features assumed such an expression of ferocity that

the old fellow was almost afraid, and recoiled instinctively. "He would have killed him," thought he.

"That which I have done for you this evening, my friend," resumed the barrister, "I did for the vicomte. I obviated, at least for the moment, the necessity of reading all of these one hundred and fifty-six letters. I told him only to stop at those marked with a cross, and to carefully read the passages indicated with a red pencil."

"It was an abridgment of his penance," remarked old Tabaret.

"He was seated," continued Noel, "before a little table, too fragile even to lean upon. I was standing with my back to the fireplace in which a fire was burning. I followed his slightest movements; and I scanned his features closely. Never in my life have I seen so sad a spectacle, nor shall I forget it, if I live for a thousand years. In less than five minutes his face changed to such an extent that his own valet would not have recognized him. He held his handkerchief in his hand, with which from time to time he mechanically wiped his lips. He grew paler and paler, and his lips became as white as his handkerchief. Large drops of sweat stood upon his forehead, and his eyes became dull and clouded, as if a film had covered them; but not an exclamation, not a sigh, not a groan, not even a gesture, escaped him. At one moment, I felt such pity for him that I was almost on the point of snatching the letters from his hands, throwing them into the fire and taking him in my arms, crying: 'No, you are my brother! Forget all; let us remain as we are and love one another!'"

M. Tabaret took Noel's hand, and pressed it. "Ah!" he said, "I recognize my generous boy."

"If I have not done this, my friend, it is because I thought to myself: 'Once these letters destroyed, would he recognize me as his brother?'"

"Ah! very true."

"In about half an hour, he had finished reading; he arose, and facing me directly, said: 'You are right, sir. If these letters are really written by my father, as I believe them to be, they distinctly prove that I am not the son of the Comtesse de Commarin.' I did not answer. 'Meanwhile,' continued he, 'these are only presumptions. Are you possessed of other proofs?' I expected, of course, a great many other objections. 'Germain,' said I, 'can speak.' He told me that Germain had been dead for several years. Then I spoke of the nurse, Widow

Lerouge. I explained how easily she could be found and questioned, adding that she lived at La Jonchere."

"And what said he, Noel, to this?" asked old Tabaret anxiously.

"He remained silent at first, and appeared to reflect. All on a sudden he struck his forehead, and said: 'I remember; I know her. I have accompanied my father to her house three times, and in my presence he gave her a considerable sum of money.' I remarked to him that this was yet another proof. He made no answer, but walked up and down the room. At length he turned toward me, saying: 'Sir, you know M. de Commarin's legitimate son?' I answered: 'I am he.' He bowed his head and murmured: 'I thought so.' He then took my hand and added: 'Brother, I bear you no ill will for this.'"

"It seems to me," remarked old Tabaret, that he might have left that to you to say, and with more reason and justice."

"No, my friend, for he is more ill-used than I. I have not been lowered, for I did not know, while he! . . ."

The old police agent nodded his head, he had to hide his thoughts, and they were stifling him.

"At length," resumed Noel, after a rather long pause, "I asked him what he proposed doing. 'Listen,' he said, 'I expect my father in about eight or ten days. You will allow me this delay. As soon as he returns I will have an explanation with him, and justice shall be done. I give you my word of honor. Take back your letters and leave me to myself. This news has utterly overwhelmed me. In a moment I lose everything: a great name that I have always borne as worthily as possible, a magnificent position, an immense fortune, and, more than all that, perhaps, the woman who is dearer to me than life. In exchange, it is true, I shall find a mother. We will console each other. And I will try, sir, to make her forget you, for she must love you, and will miss you.'"

"Did he really say that?"

"Almost word for word."

"Hypocrite!" growled the old fellow between his teeth.

"What did you say?" asked Noel.

"I say that he is a fine young man; and I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance."

"I did not show him the letter referring to the rupture," added Noel; "it is best that he should ignore Madame Gerdy's misconduct. I voluntarily deprived myself of this proof rather than give him further pain."

"And now?"

"What am I to do? I am waiting the comte's return. I shall act more freely after hearing what he has to say. To-morrow I shall ask permission to examine the papers belonging to Claudine. If I find the letters, I am saved; if not—but, as I have told you, I have formed no plan since I heard of the assassination. Now, what do you advise?"

"The briefest counsel demands long reflection," replied the old fellow, who was in haste to depart. "Alas! my poor boy, what worry you have had!"

"Terrible! and, in addition, I have pecuniary embarrassments."

"How! you who spend nothing?"

"I have entered into various engagements. Can I now make use of Madame Gerdy's fortune, which I have hitherto used as my own? I think not."

"You certainly ought not to. But listen! I am glad you have spoken of this; you can render me a service."

"Very willingly. What is it?"

"I have, locked up in my secretary, twelve or fifteen thousand francs, which trouble me exceedingly. You see, I am old, and not very brave, if any one heard I had this money—"

"I fear I can not—" commented the barrister.

"Nonsense!" said the old fellow. "To-morrow I will give them you to take care of." But remembering he was about to put himself at M. Daburon's disposal, and that perhaps he might not be free on the morrow, he quickly added: "No, not to-morrow; but this very evening. This infernal money shall not remain another night in my keeping."

He hurried out, and presently reappeared, holding in his hand fifteen notes of a thousand francs each. "If that is not sufficient," said he, handing them to Noel, "you can have more."

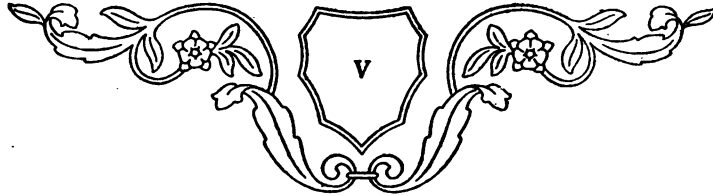
"Anyhow," replied the barrister, "I will give you a receipt for these."

"Oh! never mind. Time enough to-morrow."

"And if I die to-night?"

Then said the old fellow to him, thinking of his will: "I shall still be your debtor. Good night!" added he aloud. "You have asked my advice, I shall require the night for reflection. At present my brain is whirling; I must go into the air. If I go to bed now, I am sure to have a horrible nightmare. Come, my boy; patience and courage. Who knows whether at this very hour Providence is not working for you?"

He went out, and Noel, leaving his door open, listened to the sound of his footsteps as he descended the stairs. Almost immediately the cry of, "Open, if you please," and the banging of the door apprised him that M. Tabaret had gone out. He waited a few minutes and refilled his lamp. Then he took a small packet from one of his bureau drawers, slipped into his pocket the bank-notes lent him by his old friend, and left his study, the door of which he double-locked. On reaching the landing, he paused. He listened intently, as though the sound of Madame Gerdy's moans could reach him where he stood. Hearing nothing, he descended the stairs on tiptoe. A minute later, he was in the street.



**I**NCLUDED in Madame Gerdy's lease was a coach-house, which was used by her as a lumber room. Here were heaped together all the old rubbish of the household, broken pieces of furniture, utensils past service, articles become useless or cumbersome. It was also used to store the provision of wood and coal for the winter. This old coach-house had a small door opening on the street, which had been in disuse for many years; but which Noel had had secretly repaired and provided with a lock. He could thus enter or leave the house at any hour without the concierge or any one else knowing. It was by this door that the barrister went out, though not without using the utmost caution in opening and closing it. Once in the street, he stood still a moment, as if hesitating which way to go. Then, he slowly proceeded in the direction of the St. Lazare railway station, where a cab happening to pass, he hailed it. "Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, at the corner of the Rue de Provence," said Noel, entering the vehicle, "and drive quick."

The barrister alighted at the spot named, and dismissed the cabman. When he had seen him drive off, Noel turned into the Rue de Provence, and, after walking a few yards, rang the bell of one of the handsomest houses in the street. The door



was immediately opened. As Noel passed before him the concierge made a most respectful, and at the same time patronizing, bow, one of those salutations which Parisian concierges reserve for their favorite tenants, generous mortals always ready to give. On reaching the second floor, the barrister paused, drew a key from his pocket, and opening the door facing him, entered as if at home. But at the sound of the key in the lock, though very faint, a lady's maid, rather young and pretty, with a bold pair of eyes, ran toward him. "Ah! it is you, sir," cried she. This exclamation escaped her just loud enough to be audible at the extremity of the apartment, and serve as a signal if needed. It was as if she had cried: "Take care!" Noel did not seem to notice it. "Madame is there?" asked he.

"Yes, sir, and very angry too. This morning she wanted to send some one to you. A little while ago she spoke of going to find you, sir, herself. I have had much difficulty in prevailing on her not to disobey your orders."

"Very well," said the barrister.

"Madame is in the smoking-room," continued the girl. "I am making her a cup of tea. Will you have one, sir?"

"Yes," replied Noel. "Show me a light, Charlotte."

He passed successively through a magnificent dining-room, a splendid gilded drawing-room in Louis XIV style and entered the smoking-room. This was a rather large apartment with a very high ceiling. Once inside one might almost fancy one's self three thousand miles from Paris, in the house of some opulent mandarin of the Celestial Empire. Furniture, carpet, hangings, pictures, all had evidently been imported direct from Hong Kong or Shanghai. A rich silk tapestry, representing brilliantly colored figures, covered the walls, and hid the doors from view. All the empire of the sun and moon was depicted thereon in vermilion landscapes; corpulent mandarins surrounded by their lantern-bearers; learned men lay stupefied with opium, sleeping under their parasols; young girls, with elevated eyebrows, stumbled upon their diminutive feet, swathed in bandages. The carpet of a manufacture unknown to Europeans was strewn with fruits and flowers, so true to nature that they might have deceived a bee. Some great artist of Peking had painted on the silk which covered the ceiling numerous fantastic birds, opening on azure ground their wings of purple and gold. Slender rods of lacker, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, bordered the draperies, and marked the angles of the apartment.

Two fantastic-looking chests entirely occupied one side of the room. Articles of furniture of capricious and incoherent forms, tables with porcelain tops, and chiffoniers of precious woods encumbered every recess or angle. There were also ornamental cabinets and shelves purchased of Lien-Tsi, the Tahan of Sou-Tcheou, the artistic city, and a thousand curiosities, both miscellaneous and costly, from the ivory sticks which are used instead of forks, to the porcelain teacups, thinner than soap bubbles—miracles of the reign of Kien-Loung. A very large and very low divan piled up with cushions, covered with tapestry similar to the hangings, occupied one end of the room. There was no regular window, but instead a large single pane of glass, fixed into the wall of the house; in front of it was a double glass door with movable panels, and the space between was filled with the most rare flowers. The grate was replaced by registers adroitly concealed, which maintained in the apartment a temperature fit for hatching silkworms, thus truly harmonizing with the furniture.

When Noel entered, a woman, still young, was reclining on the divan, smoking a cigarette. In spite of the tropical heat, she was enveloped in heavy Cashmere shawls. She was small, but then only small women can unite in their persons every perfection. Women who are above the medium height must be either essays or errors of nature. No matter how lovely they may look, they invariably present some defect, like the work of a statuary, who, though possessed of genius, attempts for the first time sculpture on a grand scale. She was small, but her neck, her shoulders, and her arms had the most exquisite contours. Her hands with their tapering fingers and rosy nails looked like jewels preciousy cared for. Her feet, encased in silken stockings almost as thin as a spider's web, were a marvel; not that they recalled the very fabulous foot which Cinderella thrust into the glass slipper; but the other, very real, very celebrated, and very palpable foot, of which the fair owner (the lovely wife of a well-known banker) used to present the model either in bronze or in marble to her numerous admirers. Her face was not beautiful, nor even pretty; but her features were such as one seldom forgets; for, at the first glance, they startled the beholder like a flash of lightning. Her forehead was a little high, and her mouth unmistakably large, notwithstanding the provoking freshness of her lips. Her eyebrows were so perfect they seemed to have been drawn with India

ink; but, unhappily the pencil had been used too heavily; and they gave her an unpleasant expression when she frowned. On the other hand, her smooth complexion had a rich golden pallor; and her black and velvety eyes possessed enormous magnetic power. Her teeth were of a pearly brilliancy and whiteness, and her hair, of prodigious opulence, was black and fine, and glossy as a raven's wing.

On perceiving Noel, as he pushed aside the silken hangings, she half arose and leaned upon her elbow. "So you have come at last?" she observed in a tone of vexation; "you are very kind."

The barrister felt almost suffocated by the oppressive temperature of the room. "How warm it is!" said he; "it is enough to stifle one!"

"Do you find it so?" replied the young woman. "Well, I am actually shivering! It is true, though, that I am very unwell. Waiting is unbearable to me, it acts upon my nerves; and I have been waiting for you ever since yesterday."

"It was quite impossible for me to come," explained Noel, "quite impossible!"

"You knew, however," continued the lady, "that to-day was my settling day; and that I had several heavy accounts to settle. The tradesmen all came, and I had not a halfpenny to give them. The coachmaker sent his bill, but there was no money. Then that old rascal Clergot, to whom I had given an acceptance for three thousand francs, came and kicked up a row. How pleasant all this is!"

Noel bowed his head like a schoolboy rebuked for having neglected his lessons. "It is but one day behind," he murmured.

"And that is nothing, is it?" retorted the young woman. "A man who respects himself, my friend, may allow his own signature to be dishonored, but never that of his mistress! Do you wish to destroy my credit altogether? You know very well that the only consideration I receive is what my money pays for. So as soon as I am unable to pay, it will be all up with me."

"My dear Juliette," began the barrister gently.

"Oh, yes! that's all very fine," interrupted she. "Your dear Juliette! Your adored Juliette! So long as you are here it is really charming; but no sooner are you outside than you forget everything. Do you ever remember then that there is such a person as Juliette?"

"How unjust you are!" replied Noel. "Do you not know that I am always thinking of you? Have I not proved it to you a thousand times? Look here! I am going to prove it to you again this very instant." He withdrew from his pocket the small packet he had taken out of his bureau drawer, and, undoing it, showed her a handsome velvet casket. "Here," said he exultingly, "is the bracelet you longed for so much a week ago at Beaugran's."

Madame Juliette, without rising, held out her hand to take the casket, and, opening it with the utmost indifference, just glanced at the jewel, and merely said: "Ah!"

"Is this the one you wanted?" asked Noel.

"Yes, but it looked much prettier in the shop window." She closed the casket, and threw it carelessly on to a small table near her.

"I am unfortunate this evening," said the barrister, much mortified.

"How so?"

"I see plainly the bracelet does not please you."

"Oh, but it does. I think it lovely . . . besides, it will complete the two dozen."

It was now Noel's turn to say: "Ah! . . ." and as Juliette said nothing, he added: "Well, if you are pleased, you do not show it."

"Oh! so that is what you are driving at!" cried the lady.

"I am not grateful enough to suit you! You bring me a present, and I ought at once to pay cash, fill the house with cries of joy, and throw myself upon my knees before you, calling you a great and magnificent lord!"

Noel was unable this time to restrain a gesture of impatience, which Juliette perceived plainly enough, to her great delight.

"Would that be sufficient?" continued she. "Shall I call Charlotte, so that she may admire this superb bracelet, this monument of your generosity? Shall I have the concierge up, and call the cook to tell them how happy I am to possess such a magnificent lover?"

The barrister shrugged his shoulders like a philosopher, incapable of noticing a child's banter. "What is the use of these insulting jests?" said he. "If you have any real complaint against me, better to say so simply and seriously."

"Very well," said Juliette, "let us be serious. And that being so, I will tell you it would have been better to have

forgotten the bracelet, and to have brought me last night or this morning the eight thousand francs I wanted."

"I could not come."

"You should have sent them; messengers are still to be found at the street corners."

"If I neither brought nor sent them, my dear Juliette, it was because I did not have them. I had trouble enough in getting them promised me for to-morrow. If I have the sum this evening, I owe it to chance upon which I could not have counted an hour ago; but by which I profited, at the risk of compromising myself."

"Poor man!" said Juliette, with an ironical touch of pity in her voice. "Do you dare to tell me you have had difficulty in obtaining ten thousand francs—you?"

"Yes—I!"

The young woman looked at her lover, and burst into a fit of laughter. "You are really superb when you act the poor young man!" said she.

"I am not acting."

"So you say, my own. But I see what you are aiming at. This amiable confession is the preface. To-morrow you will declare that your affairs are very much embarrassed, and the day after to-morrow. . . . Ah! you are becoming very avaricious. It is a virtue you used not to possess. Do you not already regret the money you have given me?"

"Wretched woman!" murmured Noel, fast losing patience.

"Really," continued the lady, "I pity you, oh! so much. Unfortunate lover! Shall I get up a subscription for you? In your place, I would appeal to public charity."

Noel could stand it no longer, in spite of his resolution to remain calm. "You think it a laughing matter?" cried he. "Well! let me tell you, Juliette, I am ruined, and I have exhausted my last resources! I am reduced to expedients!"

The eyes of the young woman brightened. She looked at her lover tenderly. "Oh, if 'twas only true, my big pet!" said she. "If I only could believe you!"

The barrister was wounded to the heart. "She believes me," thought he; "and she is glad. She detests me."

He was mistaken. The idea that a man had loved her sufficiently to ruin himself for her, without allowing even a reproach to escape him, filled this woman with joy. She felt herself on the point of loving the man, now poor and humbled,

whom she had despised when rich and proud. But the expression of her eyes suddenly changed. "What a fool I am," cried she, "I was on the point of believing all that, and of trying to console you. Don't pretend that you are one of those gentlemen who scatter their money broadcast. Tell that to somebody else, my friend! All men in our days calculate like money-lenders. There are only a few fools who ruin themselves now, some conceited youngsters, and occasionally an amorous old dotard. Well, you are a very calm, very grave, and very serious fellow, but above all, a very strong one."

"Not with you, anyhow," murmured Noel.

"Come now, stop that nonsense! You know very well what you are about. Instead of a heart, you have a great big double zero, just like a Homburg. When you took a fancy to me, you said to yourself: 'I will expend so much on passion,' and you have kept your word. It is an investment, like any other, in which one receives interest in the form of pleasure. You are capable of all the extravagance in the world, to the extent of your fixed price of four thousand francs a month! If it required a franc more you would very soon take back your heart and your hat, and carry them elsewhere; to one or other of my rivals in the neighborhood."

"It is true," answered the barrister, coolly. "I know how to count, and that accomplishment is very useful to me! It enables me to know exactly how and where I have got rid of my fortune."

"So you really know?" sneered Juliette.

"And I can tell you, madame," continued he. "At first you were not very exacting, but the appetite came with eating. You wished for luxury, you have it; splendid furniture, you have it; a complete establishment, extravagant dresses, I could refuse you nothing. You required a carriage, a horse, I gave them you. And I do not mention a thousand other whims. I include neither this Chinese cabinet nor the two dozen bracelets. The total is four hundred thousand francs!"

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as any one can be who has had that amount, and has it no longer."

"Four hundred thousand francs, only fancy! Are there no centimes?"

"No."

"Then, my dear friend, if I make up my bill, you will still owe me something."

The entrance of the maid with the tea-tray interrupted this amorous duet, of which Noel had experienced more than one repetition. The barrister held his tongue on account of the servant. Juliette did the same on account of her lover, for she had no secrets for Charlotte, who had been with her three years, and with whom she had shared everything, sometimes even her lovers.

Madame Juliette Chaffour was a Parisian. She was born about 1839, somewhere in the upper end of the Faubourg Montmartre. Her father was unknown. Her infancy was a long alternation of beatings and caresses, equally furious. She had lived as best she could, on sweetmeats and damaged fruit; so that now her stomach could stand anything. At twelve years old she was as thin as a nail, as green as a June apple, and more depraved than the inmates of the prison of St. Lazare. Prudhomme would have said that this precocious little hussy was totally destitute of morality. She had not the slightest idea what morality was. She thought the world was full of honest people living like her mother, and her mother's friends. She feared neither God nor devil, but she was afraid of the police. She dreaded also certain mysterious and cruel persons, whom she had heard spoken of, who dwelt near the Palais de Justice, and who experienced a malicious pleasure in seeing pretty girls in trouble. As she gave no promise of beauty, she was on the point of being placed in a shop, when an old and respectable gentleman, who had known her mama some years previously, accorded her his protection. This old gentleman, prudent and provident, like all old gentlemen, was a connoisseur, and knew that to reap one must sow. He resolved first of all to give his protegee just a varnish of education. He procured masters for her, who in less than three years taught her to write, to play the piano, and to dance. What he did not procure for her, however, was a lover. She therefore found one for herself, an artist who taught her nothing very new, but who carried her off to offer her half of what he possessed, that is to say, nothing. At the end of three months, having had enough of it, she left the nest of her first love, with all she possessed tied up in a cotton pocket handkerchief.

During the four years which followed, she led a precarious existence, sometimes with little else to live upon but hope, which never wholly abandons a young girl who knows she

has pretty eyes. By turns she sunk to the bottom, or rose to the surface of the stream in which she found herself. Twice had fortune in new gloves come knocking at her door, but she had not the sense to keep her. With the assistance of a strolling player, she had just appeared on the stage of a small theatre, and spoken her lines rather well, when Noel by chance met her, loved her, and made her his mistress. Her barrister, as she called him, did not displease her at first. After a few months, though, she could not bear him. She detested him for his polite and polished manners, his manly bearing, his distinguished air, his contempt, which he did not care to hide, for all that is low and vulgar, and, above all, for his unalterable patience, which nothing could tire. Her great complaint against him was that he was not at all funny, and also, that he absolutely declined to conduct her to those places where one can give a free vent to one's spirits. To amuse herself, she began to squander money; and her aversion for her lover increased at the same rate as her ambition and his sacrifices. She rendered him the most miserable of men, and treated him like a dog; and this not from any natural badness of disposition, but from principle. She was persuaded that a woman is belov'd in proportion to the trouble she causes and the mischief she does.

Juliette was not wicked, and she believed she had much to complain of. The dream of her life was to be loved in a way which she felt, but could scarcely have explained. She had never been to her lovers more than a plaything. She understood this; and, as she was naturally proud, the idea enraged her. She dreamed of a man who would be devoted enough to make a real sacrifice for her, a lover who would descend to her level, instead of attempting to raise her to his. She despaired of ever meeting such a one. Noel's extravagance left her as cold as ice. She believed he was very rich, and singularly, in spite of her greediness, she did not care much for money. Noel would have won her easier by a brutal frankness that would have shown her clearly his situation. He lost her love by the delicacy of his dissimulation, that left her ignorant of the sacrifices he was making for her.

Noel adored Juliette. Until the fatal day he saw her, he had lived like a sage. This, his first passion, burned him up; and, from the disaster, he saved only appearances.

The four walls remained standing, but the interior of the



edifice was destroyed. Even heroes have their vulnerable parts, Achilles died from a wound in the heel. The most artfully constructed armor has a flaw somewhere. Noel was assailable by means of Juliette, and through her was at the mercy of everything and every one. In four years, this model young man, this barrister of immaculate reputation, this austere moralist, had squandered not only his own fortune on her, but Madame Gerdy's also. He loved her madly, without reflection, without measure, with his eyes shut. At her side, he forgot all prudence, and thought out loud. In her boudoir, he dropped his mask of habitual dissimulation, and his vices displayed themselves at ease, as his limbs in a bath. He felt himself so powerless against her, that he never essayed to struggle. She possessed him. Once or twice he attempted to firmly oppose her ruinous caprices; but she had made him pliable as the osier. Under the dark glances of this girl, his strongest resolutions melted more quickly than snow beneath an April sun. She tortured him; but she had also the power to make him forget all by a smile, a tear, or a kiss. Away from the enchantress, reason returned at intervals, and, in his lucid moments, he said to himself, "She does not love me. She is amusing herself at my expense!" But the belief in her love had taken such deep root in his heart that he could not pluck it forth. He made himself a monster of jealousy, and then argued with himself respecting her fidelity. On several occasions he had strong reasons to doubt her constancy, but he never had the courage to declare his suspicions. "If I am not mistaken, I shall either have to leave her," thought he, "or accept everything in the future." At the idea of a separation from Juliette, he trembled, and felt his passion strong enough to compel him to submit to the lowest indignity. He preferred even these heartbreaking doubts to a still more dreadful certainty.

The presence of the maid who took a considerable time in arranging the tea-table gave Noel an opportunity to recover himself. He looked at Juliette; and his anger took flight. Already he began to ask himself if he had not been a little cruel to her. When Charlotte retired, he came and took a seat on the divan beside his mistress, and attempted to put his arms round her. "Come," said he in a caressing tone, "you have been angry enough for this evening. If I have done wrong, you have punished me sufficiently. Kiss me, and make it up."

She repulsed him angrily, and said in a dry tone: "Let me alone! How many times must I tell you that I am very unwell this evening."

"You suffer, my love?" resumed the barrister, "where? Shall I send for the doctor?"

"There is no need. I know the nature of my malady; it is called ennui. You are not at all the doctor who could do anything for me."

Noel rose with a discouraged air, and took his place at the side of the tea-table, facing her. His resignation bespoke how habituated he had become to these rebuffs. Juliette snubbed him; but he returned always, like the poor dog who lies in wait all day for the time when his caresses will not be inopportune. "You have told me very often during the last few months, that I bother you. What have I done?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, then, why—?"

"My life is nothing more than a continual yawn," answered the young woman; "is it my fault? Do you think it very amusing to be your mistress? Look at yourself. Does there exist another being as sad, as dull as you, more uneasy, more suspicious, devoured by a greater jealousy?"

"Your reception of me, my dear Juliette," ventured Noel, "is enough to extinguish gaiety and freeze all effusion. Then one always fears when one loves!"

"Really! Then one should seek a woman to suit one's self, or have her made to order; shut her up in the cellar, and have her brought upstairs once a day, at the end of dinner, during dessert, or with the champagne just by way of amusement."

"I should have done better not to have come," murmured the barrister.

"Of course. I am to remain alone here, without anything to occupy me except a cigarette and a stupid book, that I go to sleep over? Do you call this an existence, never to budge out of the house even?"

"It is the life of all the respectable women that I know," replied the barrister dryly.

"Then I can not compliment them on their enjoyment. Happily, though, I am not a respectable woman, and I can tell you that I am tired of living more closely shut up than the wife of a Turk, with your face for sole amusement."

"You live shut up, you?"

"Certainly!" continued Juliette, with increased bitterness. "Come, have you ever brought one of your friends here? No, you hide me. When have you offered me your arm for a walk? Never, your dignity would be sullied, if you were seen in my company. I have a carriage. Have you entered it half a dozen times? Perhaps; but then you let down the blinds! I go out alone. I walk about alone!"

"Always the same refrain," interrupted Noel, anger getting the better of him, "always these uncalled-for complaints. As though you had still to learn the reason why this state of things exists."

"I know well enough," pursued the young woman, "that you are ashamed of me. Yet I know many bigger swells than you who do not mind being seen with their mistresses. My lord trembles for his fine name of Gerdy that I might sully, while the sons of the most noble families are not afraid of showing themselves in public places in the company of the stupidest of kept women."

At last Noel could stand it no longer, to the great delight of Madame Chaffour. "Enough of these recriminations!" cried he, rising. "If I hide our relations, it is because I am constrained to do so. Of what do you complain? You have unrestrained liberty; and you use it, too, and so largely that your actions altogether escape me. You accuse me of creating a vacuum around you. Who is to blame? Did I grow tired of a happy and quiet existence? My friends would have come to see us in a home in accordance with a modest competence. Can I bring them here? On seeing all this luxury, this insolent display of my folly, they would ask each other where I obtained all the money I have spent on you. I may have a mistress, but I have not the right to squander a fortune that does not belong to me. If my acquaintances learned to-morrow that it is I who keep you, my future prospects would be destroyed. What client would confide his interests to the imbecile who ruined himself for the woman who has been the talk of all Paris? I am not a great lord, I have neither an historical name to tarnish, nor an immense fortune to lose. I am plain Noel Gerdy, a barrister. My reputation is all that I possess. It is a false one, I admit. Such as it is, however, I must keep it, and I will keep it."

Juliette who knew her Noel thoroughly, saw that she had gone far enough. She determined, therefore, to put him in a good humor again. "My friend," said she, tenderly, "I did

not wish to cause you pain. You must be indulgent, I am so horribly nervous this evening."

This sudden change delighted the barrister, and almost sufficed to calm his anger. "You will drive me mad with your injustice," said he. "While I exhaust my imagination to find what can be agreeable to you, you are perpetually attacking my gravity; yet it is not forty-eight hours since we were plunged in all the gaiety of the carnival. I kept the fete of Shrove Tuesday like a student. We went to a theatre; I then put on a domino, and accompanied you to the ball at the opera, and even invited two of my friends to sup with us."

"It was very gay indeed!" answered the young woman, making a wry face.

"So I think."

"Do you! Then you are not hard to please. We went to the Vaudeville, it is true, but separately, as we always do, I alone above, you below. At the ball you looked as though you were burying the devil. At the supper-table your friends were as melancholy as a pair of owls. I obeyed your orders by affecting hardly to know you. You imbibed like a sponge, without my being able to tell whether you were drunk or not."

"That proves," interrupted Noel, "that we ought not to force our tastes. Let us talk of something else." He took a few steps in the room, then looking at his watch said: "Almost one o'clock; my love, I must leave you."

"What! you are not going to remain?"

"No, to my great regret; my mother is dangerously ill. He unfolded and counted out on the table the bank-notes he had received from old Tabaret.

"My little one," said he, "here are not eight thousand francs, but ten thousand. You will not see me again for a few days."

"Are you leaving Paris, then?"

"No; but my entire time will be absorbed by an affair of immense importance to myself. If I succeed in my undertaking, my dear, our future happiness is assured, and you will then see whether I love you!"

"Oh, my dear Noel, tell me what it is."

"I can not now."

"Tell me, I beseech you," pleaded the young woman, hanging round his neck, raising herself upon the tips of her toes to press her lips to his. The barrister embraced her; and his resolution seemed to waver.

"No," said he at length; "seriously, I can not. Of what use to awaken in you hopes which can never be realized? Now, my darling, listen to me. Whatever may happen, understand, you must under no pretext whatever again come to my house, as you once had the imprudence to do. Do not even write to me. By disobeying, you may do me an irreparable injury. If any accident occurs, send that old rascal Clergot to me. I shall have a visit from him the day after to-morrow, for he holds some bills of mine."

Juliette recoiled, menacing Noel with a mutinous gesture. "You will not tell me anything?" insisted she.

"Not this evening, but very soon," replied the barrister, embarrassed by the piercing glance of his mistress.

"Always some mystery!" cried Juliette, piqued at the want of success attending her blandishments.

"This will be the last, I swear to you!"

"Noel, my good man," said the young woman in a serious tone, "you are hiding something from me. I understand you, as you know; for several days past there has been something or other the matter with you; you have completely changed."

"I swear to you, Juliette—"

"No, swear nothing; I should not believe you. Only remember, no attempt at deceiving me, I forewarn you. I am a woman capable of revenge."

The barrister was evidently ill at ease. "The affair in question," stammered he, "can as well fail as succeed."

"Enough," interrupted Juliette; "your will shall be obeyed. I promise that. Come, sir, kiss me. I am going to bed."

The door was hardly shut upon Noel when Charlotte was installed on the divan near her mistress. Had the barrister been listening at the door, he might have heard Madame Juliette saying, "No, really, I can no longer endure him. What a bore he is, my girl. Ah! if I was not so afraid of him, wouldn't I leave him at once? But he is capable of killing me!"

The girl vainly tried to defend Noel; but her mistress did not listen. She murmured: "Why does he absent himself, and what is he plotting? An absence of eight days is suspicious. Can he by any chance intend to be married? Ah! if I only knew. You weary me to death, my good Noel, and I am determined to leave you to yourself one of these fine mornings; but I can not permit you to quit me first. Supposing he is going to get married? But I will not allow it. I must make inquiries."

Noel, however, was not listening at the door. He went along the Rue de Provence as quickly as possible, gained the Rue St. Lazare, and entered the house as he had departed, by the stable door. He had but just sat down in his study when the servant knocked. "Sir," cried she, "in heaven's name, answer me!"

He opened the door and said impatiently: "What is it now?"

"Sir," stammered the girl in tears, "this is the third time I have knocked, and you have not answered. Come, I implore you. I am afraid madame is dying!"

He followed her to Madame Gerdy's room. He must have found the poor woman terribly changed, for he could not restrain a movement of terror. The invalid struggled painfully beneath her coverings. Her face was of a livid paleness, as though there was not a drop of blood left in her veins; and her eyes, which glittered with a sombre light, seemed filled with a fine dust. Her hair, loose and disordered, falling over her cheeks and upon her shoulders, contributed to her wild appearance. She uttered from time to time a groan hardly audible, or murmured unintelligible words. At times a fiercer pang than the former ones forced a cry of anguish from her. She did not recognize Noel.

"You see, sir," said the servant.

"Yes. Who would have supposed her malady could advance so rapidly? Quick, run to Dr. Herve's; tell him to get up and to come at once; tell him it is for me." And he seated himself in an armchair, facing the suffering woman.

Dr. Herve was one of Noel's friends, an old school-fellow, and the companion of his student days. The doctor's history differed in nothing from that of most young men, who, without fortune, friends, or influence, enter upon the practise of the most difficult, the most hazardous of professions that exist in Paris, where one sees so many talented young doctors forced, to earn the bread, to place themselves at the disposition of infamous drug vendors. A man of remarkable courage and self-reliance, Herve, his studies over, said to himself, "No, I will not go and bury myself in the country; I will remain in Paris; I will there become celebrated. I shall be surgeon-in-chief of a hospital and a knight of the Legion of Honor." To enter upon this path of thorns, leading to a magnificent triumphal arch, the future academician ran himself twenty thousand francs in debt to furnish a small apartment. Here, armed with a patience which nothing could fatigue, an iron resolution that nothing could

subdue, he struggled and waited. Only those who have experienced it can understand what sufferings are endured by the poor, proud man, who waits in a black coat, freshly shaven, with smiling lips, while he is starving of hunger! The refinements of civilization have inaugurated punishments which put in the shade the cruelties of the savage. The unknown physician must begin by attending the poor who can not pay him. Sometimes, too, the patient is ungrateful. He is profuse in promises while in danger; but when cured he scorns the doctor, and forgets to pay him his fee.

After seven years of heroic perseverance, Herve has secured at last a circle of patients who pay him. During this he lived and paid the exorbitant interest of his debt, but he is getting on. Three or four pamphlets, and a prize won without much intrigue, have attracted public attention to him. But he is no longer the brave young enthusiast, full of the faith and hope that attended him on his first visits. He still wishes, and more than ever, to acquire distinction, but he no longer expects any pleasure from his success. He used up that feeling in the days when he had not wherewith to pay for his dinner. No matter how great his fortune may be in the days to come, he has already paid too dearly for it. For him future success is only a kind of revenge. Less than thirty-five years old, he is already sick of the world, and believes in nothing. Under the appearance of universal benevolence he conceals universal scorn. His finesse, sharpened by the grindstone of adversity, has become mischievous. And, while he sees through all disguises worn by others, he hides his penetration carefully under a mask of cheerful good nature and jovialness. But he is kind, he loves his friends, and is devoted to them.

He arrived, hardly dressed, so great had been his haste. His first words on entering were: "What is the matter?"

Noel pressed his hand in silence, and, by way of answer, pointed to the bed. In less than a minute, the doctor seized the lamp, examined the sick woman, and returned to his friend. "What has happened?" he asked sharply. "It is necessary I should know."

The barrister started. "Know what?" stammered he.

"Everything!" answered Herve. "She is suffering from inflammation of the brain. There is no mistaking that. It is by no means a common complaint, in spite of the constant working of that organ. What can have caused it? There appears

to be no injury to the brain or its bony covering; the mischief, then, must have been caused by some violent emotion, a great grief, some unexpected catastrophe—"

Noel interrupted his friend by a gesture, and drew him into the embrasure of the window. "Yes, my friend," said he in a low tone, "Madame Gerdy has experienced great mental suffering; she has been frightfully tortured by remorse. Listen, Herve. I will confide our secret to your honor and your friendship. Madame Gerdy is not my mother; she despoiled me, to enrich her son with my fortune and my name. Three weeks ago I discovered this unworthy fraud; she knows it, and the consequences terrify her. Ever since she has been dying minute by minute."

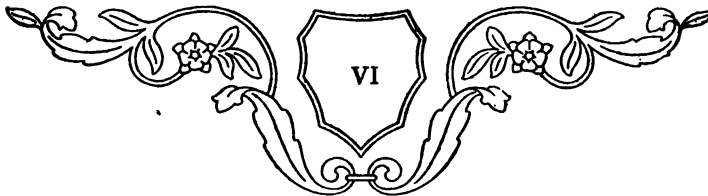
The barrister expected some exclamations of astonishment and a host of questions from his friend; but the doctor received the explanation without remark, as a simple statement, indispensable to his understanding the case. "Three weeks," he murmured; "then that explains everything. Has she appeared to suffer much during the time?"

"She complained of violent headaches, dimness of sight, and intolerable pains in her ears; she attributed all that though to megrims. Do not, however, conceal anything from me, Herve; is her complaint very serious?"

"So serious, my friend, so invariably fatal, that I am almost undertaking a hopeless task in attempting a cure."

"Ah! good heaven!"

"You asked for the truth, and I have told it you. If I had that courage, it was because you told me this poor woman is not your mother. Nothing short of a miracle can save her; but this miracle we may hope and prepare for. And now to work!"



THE clock of the St. Lazare terminus was striking eleven as old Tabaret, after shaking hands with Noel, left his house, still bewildered by what he had just heard. Obligated to restrain himself at the time, he now fully appreciated his liberty



of action. It was with an unsteady gait that he took his first steps in the street, like the toper who, after being shut up in a warm room, suddenly goes out into the open air. He was beaming with pleasure, but at the same time felt rather giddy, from that rapid succession of unexpected revelations, which, so he thought, had suddenly placed him in possession of the truth. Notwithstanding his haste to arrive at M. Daburon's, he did not take a cab. He felt the necessity of walking. He was one of those who require exercise to see things clearly. When he moved about his ideas fitted and classified themselves in his brain, like grains of wheat when shaken in a bushel. Without hastening his pace, he reached the Rue de la Chaussee d'Antin, crossed the Boulevard with its resplendent cafes, and turned to the Rue Richelieu. He walked along, unconscious of external objects, tripping and stumbling over the inequalities of the sidewalk, or slipping on the greasy pavement. If he followed the proper road, it was a purely mechanical impulse that guided him. His mind was wandering at random through the field of probabilities, and following in the darkness the mysterious thread, the almost imperceptible end of which he had seized at La Jonchere. Like all persons laboring under strong emotion without knowing it, he talked aloud, little thinking into what indiscreet ears his exclamations and disjointed phrases might fall. At every step we meet in Paris people babbling to themselves, and unconsciously confiding to the four winds of heaven their dearest secrets, like cracked vases that allow their contents to steal away. Often the passers-by mistake these eccentric monologuists for lunatics. Sometimes the curious follow them, and amuse themselves by receiving these strange confidences. It was an indiscretion of this kind which told the ruin of Riscara, the rich banker. Lambreth, the assassin of the Rue de Venise, betrayed himself in a similar manner.

"What luck!" exclaimed old Tabaret. "What an incredible piece of good fortune! Gevrol may dispute it if he likes, but after all chance is the cleverest agent of the police. Who would have imagined such a history? I was not, however, very far from the reality. I guessed there was a child in the case. But who would have dreamed of a substitution?—an old sensational effect, that playwrights no longer dare make use of. This is a striking example of the danger of following preconceived ideas in police investigation. We are affrighted at unlikelihood; and, as in this case, the greatest unlikelihood often proves to be the

truth. We retire before the absurd, and it is the absurd that we should examine. Everything is possible. I would not take a thousand crowns for what I have learned this evening. I shall kill two birds with one stone. I deliver up the criminal, and I give Noel a hearty lift up to recover his title and his fortune. There, at least, is one who deserves what he will get. For once I shall not be sorry to see a lad get on who has been brought up in the school of adversity. But, pshaw! he will be like all the rest. Prosperity will turn his brain. Already he begins to prate of his ancestors— Poor humanity! he almost made me laugh— But it is Mother Gerdy who surprises me most. A woman to whom I would have given absolution without waiting to hear her confess. When I think that I was on the point of proposing to her, ready to marry her! B-r-r-r!" At this thought the old fellow shivered. He saw himself married, and all on a sudden, discovering the antecedents of Madame Tabaret, becoming mixed up with a scandalous prosecution, compromised, and rendered ridiculous. "When I think," he continued, "that my worthy Gevrol is running after the man with the earrings! Run, my boy, run! Travel is a good thing for youth. Won't he be vexed? He will wish me dead. But I don't care. If any one wishes to do me an injury, M. Daburon will protect me. Ah! there is one to whom I am going to do a good turn. I can see him now opening his eyes like saucers when I say to him, 'I have the rascal!' He can boast of owing me something. This investigation will bring him honor, or justice is not justice. He will, at least, be made an officer of the Legion of Honor. So much the better! I like him. If he is asleep, I am going to give him an agreeable waking. Won't he just overpower me with questions! He will want to know everything at once." Old Tabaret, who was now crossing the Pont des Saints-Peres, stopped suddenly. "But the details!" said he. "By Jove! I have none. I only know the bare facts." He resumed his walk, and continued: "They are right at the office, I am too enthusiastic; I jump at conclusions, as Gevrol says. When I was with Noel, I should have cross-examined him, got hold of a quantity of useful details; but I did not even think of doing so. I drank in his words. I would have had him tell the story in a sentence. All the same, it is but natural; when one is pursuing a stag, one does not stop to shoot a blackbird. But I see very well now, I did not draw him out enough. On the other hand, by questioning him more, I might have awakened

suspensions in Noel's mind, and led him to discover that I am working for the Rue de Jerusalem. To be sure, I do not blush for my connection with the police, I am even vain of it; but at the same time I prefer that no one should know of it. People are so stupid that they detest the police, who protect them. I must be calm and on my best behavior, for here I am at the end of my journey."

M. Daburon had just gone to bed, but had given orders to his servant; so that M. Tabaret had but to give his name to be at once conducted to the magistrate's sleeping apartment. At sight of his amateur detective, M. Daburon raised himself in his bed, saying: "There is something extraordinary! What have you discovered? have you got a clue?"

"Better than that," answered the old fellow, smiling with pleasure.

"Speak quickly!"

"I know the culprit!"

Old Tabaret ought to have been satisfied; he certainly produced an effect. The magistrate bounded in his bed. "Already!" said he. "Is it possible?"

"I have the honor to repeat to you, sir," resumed the old fellow, "that I know the author of the crime of La Jonchere."

"And I," said M. Daburon, "I proclaim you the greatest of all detectives, past or future. I shall certainly never hereafter undertake an investigation without your assistance."

"You are too kind, sir. I have had little or nothing to do in the matter. The discovery is due to chance alone."

"You are modest, M. Tabaret. Chance assists only the clever, and it is that which annoys the stupid. But I beg you will be seated and proceed."

Then with the lucidness and precision of which few would have believed him capable, the old fellow repeated to the magistrate all that he had learned from Noel. He quoted from memory the extracts from the letters, almost without changing a word. "These letters," added he, "I have seen; and I have even taken one, in order to verify the writing. Here it is."

"Yes," murmured the magistrate. "Yes, M. Tabaret, you have discovered the criminal. The evidence is palpable, even to the blind. Heaven has willed this. Crime engenders crime. The great sin of the father has made the son an assassin."

"I have not given you the names, sir," resumed old Tabaret. "I wished first to hear your opinion."

"Oh! you can name them," interrupted M. Daburon with a certain degree of animation; "no matter how high he may have to strike, a French magistrate has never hesitated."

"I know it, sir, but we are going very high this time; the father who has sacrificed his legitimate son for the sake of his bastard is Comte Rheteau de Commarin, and the assassin of Widow Lerouge is the bastard, Vicomte Albert de Commarin!"

M. Tabaret, like an accomplished artist, had uttered these words slowly, and with a deliberate emphasis, confidently expecting to produce a great impression. His expectation was more than realized. M. Daburon was struck with stupor. He remained motionless, his eyes dilated with astonishment. Mechanically he repeated like a word without meaning which he was trying to impress upon his memory: "Albert de Commarin! Albert de Commarin!"

"Yes," insisted old Tabaret, "the noble vicomte. It is incredible, I know." But he perceived the alteration in the magistrate's face, and, a little frightened, he approached the bed. "Are you unwell, sir?" he asked.

"No," answered M. Daburon, without exactly knowing what he said. "I am very well; but the surprise, the emotion—"

"I understand that," said the old fellow.

"Yes, it is not surprising, is it? I should like to be alone a few minutes. Do not leave the house though; we must converse at some length on this business. Kindly pass into my study, there ought still to be a fire burning there. I will join you directly."

Then M. Daburon slowly got out of bed, put on a dressing-gown, and seated himself, or rather fell, into an armchair. His face, to which in the exercise of his austere functions he had managed to give the immobility of marble, reflected the most cruel agitation; while his eyes betrayed the inward agony of his soul. The name of Commarin, so unexpectedly pronounced, awakened in him the most sorrowful recollections, and tore open a wound but badly healed. This name recalled to him an event which had rudely extinguished his youth and spoiled his life. Involuntarily he carried his thoughts back to this epoch, so as to taste again all its bitterness. An hour ago it had seemed to him far removed and already hidden in the mists of the past; one word had sufficed to recall it clearly and distinctly. It seemed to him now that this event, in which the name of Albert de Commarin was mixed up, dated from yesterday. In reality nearly two years had elapsed since.

Pierre-Marie Daburon belonged to one of the oldest families of Poitou. Three or four of his ancestors had filled successively the most important positions in the province. Why, then, had they not bequeathed a title and a coat of arms to their descendants? The magistrate's father possesses, round about the ugly modern chateau which he inhabits, more than eight hundred thousand francs' worth of the most valuable land. By his mother, a Cottevise-Luxe, he is related to the highest nobility of Poitou, one of the most exclusive that exists in France, as every one knows. When he received his nomination in Paris, his relationship caused him to be received at once by five or six aristocratic families, and it was not long before he extended his circle of acquaintance. He possessed, however, none of the qualifications which insure social success. He was cold and grave even to sadness, reserved and timid even to excess. His mind wanted brilliancy and lightness; he lacked the facility of repartee and the amiable art of conversing without a subject; he could neither tell a lie nor pay an insipid compliment. Like most men who feel deeply, he was unable to interpret his impressions immediately. He required to reflect and consider within himself. However, he was sought after for more solid qualities than these: for the nobleness of his sentiments, his pleasant disposition, and the certainty of his connections. Those who knew him intimately quickly learned to esteem his sound judgment, his keen sense of honor, and to discover under his cold exterior a warm heart, an excessive sensibility, and a delicacy almost feminine. In a word, although he might be eclipsed in a room full of strangers or simpletons, he charmed all hearts in a smaller circle where he felt warmed by an atmosphere of sympathy. He accustomed himself to go about a great deal. He reasoned, wisely perhaps, that a magistrate can make better use of his time than by remaining shut up in his study in company with books of law. He thought that a man called upon to judge others ought to know them, and for that purpose study them. An attentive and discreet observer, he examined the play of human interests and passions, exercised himself in disentangling and manœuvring at need the strings of the puppets he saw moving around him. Piece by piece, so to say, he labored to comprehend the working of the complicated machine called society, of which he was charged to overlook the movements, regulate the springs, and keep the wheels in order.

And on a sudden, in the early part of the winter of 1860 and

1861, M. Daburon disappeared. His friends sought for him, but he was nowhere to be met with. What could he be doing? Inquiry resulted in the discovery that he passed nearly all his evenings at the house of the Marquise d'Arlange. The surprise was as great as it was natural. This dear marquise was, or rather is—for she is still in the land of the living—a personage whom one would consider rather out of date. She is surely the most singular legacy bequeathed us by the eighteenth century. How and by what marvelous process she had been preserved such as we see her, it is impossible to say. Listening to her, you would swear that she was yesterday at one of those parties given by the queen where cards and high stakes were the rule, much to the annoyance of Louis XVI, and where the great ladies cheated openly in emulation of each other. Manners, language, habits, almost costume, she has preserved everything belonging to that period about which authors have written only to display the defects. Her appearance alone will tell more than an exhaustive article, and an hour's conversation with her, more than a volume. She was born in a little principality, where her parents had taken refuge while awaiting the chastisements and repentance of an erring and rebellious people. She had been brought up among the old nobles of the emigration, in some very ancient and very gilded apartment, just as though she had been in a cabinet of curiosities. Her mind had awakened amid the hum of antediluvian conversations, her imagination had first been aroused by arguments a little less profitable than those of an assembly of deaf persons convoked to decide upon the merits of the work of some distinguished musician. Here she imbibed a fund of ideas, which, applied to the forms of society of to-day, are as grotesque as would be those of a child shut up until twenty years of age in an Assyrian museum. The First Empire, the Restoration, the monarchy of July, the Second Republic, the Second Empire, have passed beneath her windows, but she has not taken the trouble to open them. All that has happened since '89 she considers as never having been. For her it is a nightmare from which she is still awaiting a release. She has looked at everything, but then she looks through her own pretty glasses which show her everything as she would wish it, and which are to be obtained of dealers in illusions.

Though over sixty-eight years old, she is as straight as a poplar, and has never been ill. She is vivacious and active to

excess, and can only keep still when asleep or when playing her favorite game of piquet. She has her four meals a day, eats like a vintager, and takes her wine neat. She professes an undisguised contempt for the silly women of our century who live for a week on a partridge, and inundate with water grand sentiments which they entangle in long phrases. She has always been, and still is, very positive, and her word is prompt and easily understood. She never shrinks from using the most appropriate word to express her meaning. So much the worse if some delicate ears object! She heartily detests hypocrisy. She believes in God, but she believes also in M. de Voltaire, so that her devotion is, to say the least, problematical. However, she is on good terms with the curate of her parish, and is very particular about the arrangement of her dinner on the days she honors him with an invitation to her table. She seems to consider him a subaltern, very useful to her salvation, and capable of opening the gate of paradise for her. Such as she is, she is shunned like the plague. Everybody dreads her loud voice, her terrible indiscretion, and the frankness of speech which she affects, in order to have the right of saying the most unpleasant things which pass through her head. Of all her family, there only remains her granddaughter, whose father died very young. Of a fortune originally large, and partly restored by the indemnity allowed by the government, but since administered in the most careless manner, she has only been able to preserve an income of twenty thousand francs, which diminishes day by day. She is also proprietor of the pretty little house which she inhabits, situated near the Invalides, between a rather narrow courtyard and a very extensive garden. So circumstanced, she considers herself the most unfortunate of God's creatures, and passes the greater part of her life complaining of her poverty. From time to time, especially after some exceptionally bad speculation, she confesses that what she fears most is to die in a pauper's bed.

A friend of M. Daburon's presented him one evening to the Marquise d'Arlange, having dragged him to her house in a mirthful mood, saying: "Come with me, and I will show you a phenomenon, a ghost of the past in flesh and bone." The marquise rather puzzled the magistrate the first time he was admitted to her presence. On his second visit she amused him very much; for which reason he came again. But after a while she no longer amused him, though he still continued a faithful

and constant visitor to the rose-colored boudoir wherein she passed the greater part of her life. Madame d'Arlange conceived a violent friendship for him, and became eloquent in his praises. "A most charming young man," she declared; "delicate and sensible! What a pity he is not 'born'! One can receive him, though, all the same; his forefathers were very decent people, and his mother was a Cottevise, who, however, went wrong. I wish him well, and will do all I can to push him forward." The strongest proof of friendship he received from her was that she condescended to pronounce his name like the rest of the world. She had preserved that ridiculous affectation of forgetfulness of the names of people who were not of noble birth, and who in her opinion had no right to names. She was so confirmed in this habit that, if by accident she pronounced such a name correctly, she immediately repeated it with some ludicrous alteration. During his first visit, M. Daburon was extremely amused at hearing his name altered every time she addressed him. Successively she made it Taburon, Dabiron, Maliron, Laliron, Laridon; but in three months' time she called him Daburon as distinctly as if he had been a duke of something and a lord of somewhere.

Occasionally she exerted herself to prove to the worthy magistrate that he was a nobleman, or at least ought to be. She would have been happy if she could have persuaded him to adopt some title, and have a helmet engraved upon his visiting cards. "How is it possible," said she, "that your ancestors, eminent, wealthy, and influential, never thought of being raised from the common herd and securing a title for their descendants? To-day you would possess a presentable pedigree."

"My ancestors were wise," responded M. Daburon. "They preferred being foremost among their fellow citizens to becoming last among the nobles." Upon which the marquise explained, and proved to demonstration, that between the most influential and wealthy citizen and the smallest scion of nobility there was an abyss that all the money in the world could not fill up.

They who were so surprised at the frequency of the magistrate's visits to this celebrated "relic of the past" did not know that lady's granddaughter, or, at least, did not recollect her; she went out so seldom! The old marquise did not care, so she said, to be bothered with a young spy who would be in her way when she related some of her choice anecdotes. Claire d'Arlange was just seventeen years old. She was extremely graceful and



gentle in manner, and lovely in her natural innocence. She had a profusion of fine light-brown hair, which fell in ringlets over her well-shaped neck and shoulders. Her figure was still rather slender, but her features recalled Guido's most celestial faces. Her blue eyes, shaded by long lashes of a hue darker than her hair, had above all an adorable expression. A certain air of antiquity, the result of her association with her grandmother, added yet another charm to the young girl's manner. She had more sense, however, than her relative; and, as her education had not been neglected, she had imbibed pretty correct ideas of the world in which she lived. This education, these practical ideas, Claire owed to her governess, upon whose shoulders the marquis had thrown the entire responsibility of cultivating her mind. This governess, Mademoiselle Schmidt, chosen at hazard, happened by the most fortunate chance to be both well informed and possessed of principle. She was, what is often met with on the other side of the Rhine, a woman at once romantic and practical, of the tenderest sensibility and the severest virtue. This good woman, while she carried her pupil into the land of sentimental fantasy and poetical imaginings, gave her at the same time the most practical instruction in matters relating to actual life. She revealed to Claire all the peculiarities of thought and manner that rendered her grandmother so ridiculous, and taught her to avoid them, but without ceasing to respect them.

Every evening, on arriving at Madame d'Arlange's, M. Daburon was sure to find Claire seated beside her grandmother, and it was for that that he called. While listening with an inattentive ear to the old lady's rigmaroles and her interminable anecdotes of the emigration, he gazed upon Claire, as a fanatic upon his idol. Often in his ecstasy he forgot where he was for the moment and became absolutely oblivious of the old lady's presence, although her shrill voice was piercing the tympanum of his ear like a needle. Then he would answer her at cross-purposes, committing the most singular blunders, which he labored afterward to explain. But he need not have taken the trouble. Madame d'Arlange did not perceive her courtier's absence of mind; her questions were of such a length that she did not care about the answers. Having a listener, she was satisfied, provided that from time to time he gave signs of life. When obliged to sit down to play piquet, he cursed below his breath the game and its detestable inventor. He paid no atten-

tion to his cards. He made mistakes every moment, discarding what he should keep in and forgetting to cut. The old lady was annoyed by these continual distractions, but she did not scruple to profit by them. She looked at the discard, changed the cards which did not suit her, while she audaciously scored points she never made, and pocketed the money thus won without shame or remorse. M. Daburon's timidity was extreme, and Claire was unsociable to excess; they therefore seldom spoke to each other. During the entire winter the magistrate did not directly address the young girl ten times; and on these rare occasions he had learned mechanically by heart the phrase he proposed to repeat to her, well knowing that, without this precaution, he would most likely be unable to finish what he had to say. But at least he saw her, he breathed the same air with her, he heard her voice, whose pure and harmonious vibrations thrilled his very soul. By constantly watching her eyes he learned to understand all their expressions. He believed he could read in them all her thought, and through them look into her soul as through an open window. "She is pleased to-day," he would say to himself; and then he would be happy. At other times, he thought, "She has met with some annoyance to-day"; and immediately he became sad. The idea of asking for her hand many times presented itself to his imagination; but he never dared to entertain it. Knowing, as he did, the marquise's prejudices, her devotion to titles, her dread of any approach to a *mésalliance*, he was convinced she would shut his mouth at the first word by a very decided "no," which she would maintain. To attempt the thing would be to risk, without a chance of success, his present happiness, which he thought immense, for love lives upon its own misery. "Once repulsed," thought he, "the house is shut against me; and then farewell to happiness, for life will end for me." Upon the other hand, the very rational thought occurred to him that another might see Mademoiselle d'Arlange, love her, and, in consequence, ask for and obtain her. In either case, hazarding a proposal, or hesitating still, he must certainly lose her in the end. By the commencement of spring, his mind was made up.

One fine afternoon, in the month of April, he bent his steps toward the residence of Madame d'Arlange, having truly need of more bravery than a soldier about to face a battery. He, like the soldier, whispered to himself, "Victory or death!" The marquise, who had gone out shortly after breakfast, had just

returned in a terrible rage, and was uttering screams like an eagle.

This was what had taken place. She had had some work done by a neighboring painter some eight or ten months before, and the workman had presented himself a hundred times to receive payment, without avail. Tired of this proceeding, he had summoned the high and mighty Marquise d'Arlange before the Justice of the Peace. This summons had exasperated the marquise; but she kept the matter to herself, having decided, in her wisdom, to call upon the judge and request him to reprimand the insolent painter who had dared to plague her for a paltry sum of money. The result of this fine project may be guessed. The judge had been compelled to eject her forcibly from his office; hence her fury.

M. Daburon found her in the rose-colored boudoir half undressed, her hair in disorder, red as a peony, and surrounded by the debris of the glass and china which had fallen under her hands in the first moments of her passion. Unfortunately, too, Claire and her governess were gone out. A maid was occupied in inundating the old lady with all sorts of waters, in the hope of calming her nerves. She received Daburon as a messenger direct from Providence. In a little more than half an hour she told her story, interlarded with numerous interjections and imprecations. "Do you comprehend this judge?" cried she. "He must be some frantic Jacobin—some son of the furies, who washed their hands in the blood of their king. Ah! my friend, I read stupor and indignation in your glance. He listened to the complaint of that impudent scoundrel whom I enabled to live by employing him! And when I addressed some severe remonstrances to this judge, as it was my duty to do, he had me turned out! Do you hear? turned out!" At this painful recollection she made a menacing gesture with her arm. In her sudden movement she struck a handsome scent bottle that her maid held in her hand. The force of the blow sent it to the other end of the room, where it broke into pieces. "Stupid, awkward fool!" cried the marquise, venting her anger upon the frightened girl. M. Daburon, bewildered at first, now endeavored to calm her exasperation. She did not allow him to pronounce three words. "Happily you are here," she continued; "you are always willing to serve me, I know. I count upon you! you will exercise your influence, your powerful friends, your credit, to have this pitiful painter and this mis-

creant of a judge flung into some deep ditch, to teach them the respect due to a woman of my rank."

The magistrate did not permit himself even to smile at this imperative demand. He had heard many speeches as absurd issue from her lips without ever making fun of them. Was she not Claire's grandmother? For that alone he loved and venerated her. He blessed her for her granddaughter, as an admirer of nature blesses heaven for the wild-flower that delights him with its perfume. The fury of the old lady was terrible; nor was it of short duration. At the end of an hour, however, she was, or appeared to be, pacified. They replaced her head-dress, repaired the disorder of her toilet, and picked up the fragments of broken glass and china. Vanquished by her own violence, the reaction was immediate and complete. She fell back helpless and exhausted into an armchair. This magnificent result was due to the magistrate. To accomplish it, he had had to use all his ability, to exercise the most angelic patience, the greatest tact. His triumph was the more meritorious because he came completely unprepared for this adventure, which interfered with his intended proposal. The first time that he had felt sufficient courage to speak, fortune seemed to declare against him, for this untoward event had quite upset his plans. Arming himself, however, with his professional eloquence, he talked the old lady into calmness. He was not so foolish as to contradict her. On the contrary, he caressed her hobby. He was humorous and pathetic by turns. He attacked the authors of the Revolution, cursed its errors, deplored its crimes, and almost wept over its disastrous results. Commencing with the infamous Marat, he eventually reached the rascal of a judge who had offended her. He abused his scandalous conduct in good set terms, and was exceedingly severe upon the dishonest scamp of a painter. However, he thought it best to let them off the punishment they so richly deserved; and ended by suggesting that it would perhaps be prudent, wise, noble even to pay.

The unfortunate word "pay" brought Madame d'Arlange to her feet in the fiercest attitude. "Pay!" she screamed. "In order that these scoundrels may persist in their obduracy! Encourage them by a culpable weakness! Never! Besides, to pay one must have money, and I have none!"

"Why!" said M. Daburon, "it amounts to but eighty-seven francs!"

"And is that nothing?" asked the marquise; "you talk very foolishly, my dear sir. It is easy to see that you have money; your ancestors were people of no rank, and the Revolution passed a hundred feet above their heads. Who can tell whether they may not have been the gainers by it? It took all from the D'Arlanges. What will they do to me if I do not pay?"

"Well, madame, they can do many things; almost ruin you in costs. They may seize your furniture."

"Alas!" cried the old lady, "the Revolution is not ended yet. We shall all be swallowed up by it, my poor Daburon! Ah! you are happy, you who belong to the people! I see plainly that I must pay this man without delay, and it is frightfully sad for me, for I have nothing, and am forced to make such sacrifices for the sake of my grandchild!"

This statement surprised the magistrate so strongly that involuntarily he repeated half-aloud: "Sacrifices?"

"Certainly!" resumed Madame d'Arlange. Without her, would I have to live as I am doing, refusing myself everything to make both ends meet? Not a bit of it! I would invest my fortune in a life annuity. But I know, thank heaven, the duties of a mother; and I economize all I can for my little Claire." This devotion appeared so admirable to M. Daburon that he could not utter a word. "Ah! I am terribly anxious about this dear child," continued the marquise. "I confess, M. Daburon, it makes me giddy when I wonder how I am to marry her."

The magistrate reddened with pleasure. At last his opportunity had arrived; he must take advantage of it at once. "It seems to me," stammered he, "that to find Mademoiselle Claire a husband ought not to be difficult."

"Unfortunately, it is. She is pretty enough, I admit, although rather thin, but, nowadays, beauty goes for nothing. Men are so mercenary they think only of money. I do not know of one who has the manhood to take a D'Arlange with her bright eyes for a dowry."

"I believe that you exaggerate," remarked M. Daburon, timidly.

"By no means. Trust to my experience, which is far greater than yours. Besides, when I find a son-in-law, he will cause me a thousand troubles. Of this I am assured by my lawyer. I shall be compelled, it seems, to render an account of Claire's patrimony. As if ever I kept accounts! It is shameful! Ah!

if Claire had any sense of filial duty, she would quietly take the veil in some convent. I would use every effort to pay the necessary dowry; but she has no affection for me."

M. Daburon felt that now was the time to speak. He collected his courage, as a good horseman pulls his horse together when going to leap a hedge, and in a voice which he tried to render firm, he said: "Well! madame, I believe I know a man who would suit Mademoiselle Claire—an honest man, who loves her, and who will do everything in the world to make her happy."

"That," said Madame d'Arange, "is always understood."

"The man of whom I speak," continued the magistrate, "is still young, and is rich. He will be only too happy to receive Mademoiselle Claire without a dowry. Not only will he decline an examination of your accounts of guardianship, but he will beg you to invest your fortune as you think fit."

"Really! Daburon, my friend, you are by no means a fool!" exclaimed the old lady.

"If you prefer not to invest your fortune in a life annuity, your son-in-law will allow you sufficient to make up what you now find wanting."

"Ah! really I am stifling," interrupted the marquise. "What! you know such a man, and have never yet mentioned him to me! You ought to have introduced him long ago."

"I did not dare, madame, I was afraid—"

"Quick! tell me who is this admirable son-in-law, this white blackbird? Where does he nestle?"

The magistrate felt a strange fluttering of the heart; he was going to stake his happiness on a word. At length he stammered: "It is I, madame!"

His voice, his look, his gesture was beseeching. He was surprised at his own audacity, frightened at having vanquished his timidity, and was on the point of falling at the old lady's feet. She, however, laughed until the tears came into her eyes, then shrugging her shoulders, she said: "Really, dear Daburon is too ridiculous, he will make me die of laughing! He is so amusing!" After which she burst out laughing again. But suddenly she stopped, in the very height of her merriment, and assumed her most dignified air. "Are you perfectly serious in all you have told me, M. Daburon?" she asked.

"I have stated the truth," murmured the magistrate.

"You are then very rich?"

"I inherited, madame, from my mother, about twenty thou-

sands francs a year. One of my uncles, who died last year, bequeathed me over a hundred thousand crowns. My father is worth about a million. Were I to ask him for the half tomorrow, he would give it to me; he would give me all his fortune, if it were necessary to my happiness, and be but too well contented should I leave him the administration of it."

Madame d'Arlange signed to him to be silent; and for five good minutes at least she remained plunged in reflection, her forehead resting in her hands. At length she raised her head. "Listen," said she. "Had you been so bold as to make this proposal to Claire's father, he would have called his servants to show you the door. For the sake of our name I ought to do the same; but I can not do so. I am old and desolate; I am poor; my grandchild's prospects disquiet me; that is my excuse. I can not, however, consent to speak to Claire of this horrible mésalliance. What I can promise you, and that is too much, is that I will not be against you. Take your own measures; pay your addresses to Mademoiselle d'Arlange, and try to persuade her. If she says 'yes' of her own free will, I shall not say 'no.'"

M. Daburon, transported with happiness, could almost have embraced the old lady. He thought her the best, the most excellent of women, not noticing the facility with which this proud spirit had been brought to yield. He was delirious, almost mad.

"Wait!" said the old lady; "your cause is not yet gained. Your mother, it is true, was a Cottevise, and I must excuse her for marrying so wretchedly; but your father is simple M. Daburon. This name, my dear friend, is simply ridiculous. Do you think it will be easy to make a Daburon of a young girl who for nearly eighteen years has been called D'Arlange?"

This objection did not seem to trouble the magistrate.

"After all," continued the old lady, "your father gained a Cottevise, so you may win a D'Arlange. On the strength of marrying into noble families, the Daburons may perhaps end by ennobling themselves. One last piece of advice; you believe Claire to be just as she looks—timid, sweet, obedient. Deceive yourself, my friend. Despite her innocent air, she is hardy, fierce, and obstinate as the marquis, her father, who was worse than an Auvergne mule. Now you are warned. Our conditions are agreed to, are they not? Let us say no more on the subject. I almost wish you to succeed."

This scene was so present to the magistrate's mind that, as he sat at home in his armchair, though many months had passed since these events, he still seemed to hear the old lady's voice, and the word "success" still sounded in his ears. He departed in triumph from the D'Arlange abode, which he had entered with a heart swelling with anxiety. He walked with his head erect, his chest dilated, and breathing the fresh air with the full strength of his lungs. He was so happy! The sky appeared to him more blue, the sun more brilliant. This grave magistrate felt a mad desire to stop the passers-by, to press them in his arms, to cry to them: "Have you heard? The marquise consents!" He walked, and the earth seemed to him to give way beneath his footsteps; it was either too small to carry so much happiness, or else he had become so light that he was going to fly away toward the stars. What castles in the air he built upon what Madame d'Arlange had said to him! He would tender his resignation. He would build on the banks of the Loire, not far from Tours, an enchanting little villa. He already saw it, with its facade to the rising sun, nestling in the midst of flowers, and shaded with widespreading trees. He furnished this dwelling in the most luxuriant style. He wished to provide a marvelous casket, worthy the pearl he was about to possess. For he had not a doubt; not a cloud obscured the horizon made radiant by his hopes, no voice at the bottom of his heart raised itself to cry: "Beware!"

From that day, his visits to the marquise became more frequent. He might almost be said to live at her house. While he preserved his respectful and reserved demeanor toward Claire, he strove assiduously to be something in her life. True love is ingenuous. He learned to overcome his timidity, to speak to the well-beloved of his soul, to encourage her to converse with him, to interest her. He went in quest of all the news, to amuse her. He read all the new books, and brought to her all that were fit for her to read. Little by little he succeeded, thanks to the most delicate persistence, in taming this shy young girl. He began to perceive that her fear of him had almost disappeared, that she no longer received him with the cold and haughty air which had previously kept him at a distance. He felt that he was insensibly gaining her confidence. She still blushed when she spoke to him; but she no longer hesitated to address the first word. She even ventured at times to ask him a question. If she had heard a play well spoken of and wished



to know the subject, M. Daburon would at once go to see it, and commit a complete account of it to writing, which he would send her through the post. At times she intrusted him with trifling commissions, the execution of which he would not have exchanged for the Russian embassy. Once he ventured to send her a magnificent bouquet. She accepted it with an air of uneasy surprise, but begged him not to repeat the offering. The tears came to his eyes; he left her presence broken-hearted, and the unhappiest of men. "She does not love me," thought he; "she will never love me." But, three days later, as he looked very sad, she begged him to procure her certain flowers, then very much in fashion, which she wished to place on her flower-stand. He sent enough to fill the house from the garret to the cellar. "She will love me," he whispered to himself in his joy. These events, so trifling but yet so great, had not interrupted the games of piquet; only the young girl now appeared to interest herself in the play, nearly always taking the magistrate's side against the marquise. She did not understand the game very well; but, when the old gambler cheated too openly, she would notice it, and say, laughingly: "She is robbing you, M. Daburon—she is robbing you!" He would willingly have been robbed of his entire fortune to hear that sweet voice raised on his behalf.

It was summer-time. Often in the evening she accepted his arm, and, while the marquise remained at the window, seated in her armchair, they walked around the lawn, treading lightly upon the paths spread with gravel sifted so fine that the trailing of her light dress effaced the traces of their footsteps. She chatted gaily with him, as with a beloved brother, while he was obliged to do violence to his feelings, to refrain from imprinting a kiss upon the little blond head, from which the light breeze lifted the curls and scattered them like fleecy clouds. At such moments, he seemed to tread an enchanted path strewn with flowers, at the end of which appeared happiness. When he attempted to speak of his hopes to the marquise, she would say: "You know what we agreed upon. Not a word. Already does the voice of conscience reproach me for lending my countenance to such an abomination. To think that I may one day have a granddaughter calling herself Madame Daburon! You must petition the king, my friend, to change your name." If instead of intoxicating himself with dreams of happiness, this acute observer had studied the character of his idol, the effect

might have been to put him upon his guard. In the mean while, he noticed singular alterations in her humor. On certain days, she was gay and careless as a child. Then, for a week, she would remain melancholy and dejected. Seeing her in this state the day following a ball, to which her grandmother had made a point of taking her, he dared to ask her the reason of her sadness.

"Oh! that," answered she, heaving a deep sigh, "is my secret—a secret of which even my grandmother knows nothing."

M. Daburon looked at her. He thought he saw a tear between her long eyelashes.

"One day," continued she, "I may confide in you: it will perhaps be necessary."

The magistrate was blind and deaf. "I also," answered he, "have a secret, which I wish to confide to you in return."

When he retired toward midnight, he said to himself: "To-morrow I will confess everything to her." Then passed a little more than fifty days, during which he kept repeating to himself: "To-morrow!"

It happened at last one evening in the month of August; the heat all day had been overpowering; toward dusk a breeze had risen, the leaves rustled; there were signs of a storm in the atmosphere. They were seated together at the bottom of the garden, under the arbor, adorned with exotic plants, and, through the branches, they perceived the fluttering gown of the marquise, who was taking a turn after her dinner. They had remained a long time without speaking, enjoying the perfume of the flowers, the calm beauty of the evening. M. Daburon ventured to take the young girl's hand. It was the first time, and the touch of her fine skin thrilled through every fibre of his frame, and drove the blood surging to his brain. "Mademoiselle," stammered he, "Claire—"

She turned toward him her beautiful eyes, filled with astonishment.

"Forgive me," continued he—"forgive me. I have spoken to your grandmother, before daring to raise my eyes to you. Do you not understand me? A word from your lips will decide my future happiness or misery. Claire, mademoiselle, do not spurn me: I love you!"

While the magistrate was speaking, Mademoiselle d'Arlande looked at him as though doubtful of the evidence of her senses; but at the words, "I love you!" pronounced with the trembling

accents of the most devoted passion, she disengaged her hand sharply, and uttered a stifled cry. "You," murmured she, "is this really you?"

M. Daburon, at this the most critical moment of his life, was powerless to utter a word. The presentiment of an immense misfortune oppressed his heart. What were then his feelings when he saw Claire burst into tears? She hid her face in her hands, and kept repeating: "I am very unhappy, very unhappy!"

"You unhappy?" exclaimed the magistrate at length. "And through me. Claire, you are cruel! In heaven's name, what have I done? What is the matter? Speak! Anything rather than this anxiety which is killing me."

He knelt before her on the graveled walk, and again made an attempt to take her hand. She repulsed him with an imploring gesture. "Let me weep," said she; "I suffer so much, you are going to hate me, I feel it. Who knows! you will, perhaps, despise me, and yet I swear before heaven that I never expected what you have just said to me, that I had not even a suspicion of it!"

M. Daburon remained upon his knees, awaiting his doom.

"Yes," continued Claire, "you will think you have been the victim of a detestable coquetry. I see it now! I comprehend everything! It is not possible that, without a profound love, a man can be all that you have been to me. Alas! I was but a child. I gave myself up to the great happiness of having a friend! Am I not alone in the world, and as if lost in a desert? Silly and imprudent, I thoughtlessly confided in you, as in the best, the most indulgent of fathers."

These words revealed to the unfortunate magistrate the extent of his error. The same as a heavy hammer, they smashed into a thousand fragments the fragile edifice of his hopes. He raised himself slowly, and, in a tone of involuntary reproach, he repeated: "Your father!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlange felt how deeply she had wounded this man whose intense love she dare not even fathom. "Yes," she resumed, "I love you as a father! Seeing you, usually so grave and austere, become for me so good, so indulgent, I thanked heaven for sending me a protector to replace those who are dead."

M. Daburon could not restrain a sob; his heart was breaking. "One word," continued Claire—"one single word would have enlightened me. Why did you not pronounce it? It was with

such happiness that I leaned on you as a child on its mother; and with what inward joy I said to myself: 'I am sure of one friend, of one heart into which runs the overflow of mine!' Ah! why was not my confidence greater? Why did I withhold my secret from you? I might have avoided this fearful calamity. I ought to have told you long since. I no longer belong to myself freely and with happiness, I have given my life to another."

To hover in the clouds, and suddenly to fall rudely to the earth, such was M. Daburon's fate; his sufferings are not to be described. "Far better to have spoken," answered he; "yet, no. I owe to your silence, Claire, six months of delicious illusions, six months of enchanting dreams. This shall be my share of life's happiness."

The last beams of closing day still enabled the magistrate to see Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Her beautiful face had the whiteness and the immobility of marble. Heavy tears rolled silently down her cheeks. It seemed to M. Daburon that he was beholding the frightful spectacle of a weeping statue. "You love another," said he at length, "another! And your grandmother does not know it. Claire, you can only have chosen a man worthy of your love. How is it the marquise does not receive him?"

"There are certain obstacles," murmured Claire, "obstacles which perhaps we may never be able to remove; but a girl like me can love but once. She marries him she loves, or she belongs to heaven!"

"Certain obstacles!" said M. Daburon in a hollow voice. "You love a man, he knows it, and he is stopped by obstacles?"

"I am poor," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlange, "and his family is immensely rich. His father is cruel, inexorable."

"His father," cried the magistrate, with a bitterness he did not dream of hiding, "his father, his family, and that withholds him! You are poor, he is rich, and that stops him! And yet he knows you love him! Ah! why am I not in his place? and why have I not the entire universe against me? What sacrifice can compare with love? such as I understand it. Nay, would it be a sacrifice? That which appears most so, is it not really an immense joy? To suffer, to struggle, to wait, to hope always, to devote one's self entirely to another; that is my idea of love."

"It is thus I love," said Claire with simplicity.

This answer crushed the magistrate. He could understand it. He knew that for him there was no hope; but he felt a terrible enjoyment in torturing himself, and proving his misfortune by intense suffering. "But," insisted he, "how have you know him, spoken to him? Where? When? Madame d'Arlange receives no one."

"I ought now to tell you everything, sir," answered Claire proudly. "I have known him for a long time. It was at the house of one of my grandmother's friends, who is a cousin of his—old Mademoiselle Goello, that I saw him for the first time. There we spoke to each other; there we meet each other now."

"Ah!" exclaimed M. Daburon, whose eyes were suddenly opened, "I remember now. A few days before your visit to Mademoiselle Goello, you are gayer than usual; and, when you return, you are often sad."

"That is because I see how much he is pained by the obstacles he can not overcome."

"Is his family, then, so illustrious," asked the magistrate harshly, "that it disdains alliance with yours?"

"I should have told you everything, without waiting to be questioned, sir," answered Mademoiselle d'Arlange, "even his name. He is called Albert de Commarin."

The marquise at this moment, thinking she had walked enough, was preparing to return to her rose-colored boudoir. She therefore approached the arbor, and exclaimed in her loud voice: "Worthy magistrate, piquet awaits you."

Mechanically the magistrate arose, stammering, "I am coming."

Claire held him back. "I have not asked you to keep my secret, sir," she said.

"Oh, mademoiselle!" said M. Daburon, wounded by this appearance of doubt.

"I know," resumed Claire, "that I can count upon you; but, come what will, my tranquillity is gone." M. Daburon looked at her with an air of surprise; his eyes questioned her. "It is certain," continued she, "that when I, a young and inexperienced girl, have failed to see, has not passed unnoticed by my grandmother. That she has continued to receive you is a tacit encouragement of your addresses; which I consider, permit me to say, are very honorable to myself."

"I have already mentioned, mademoiselle," replied the magis-

trate, "that the marquise has deigned to authorize my hopes." And briefly he related his interview with Madame d'Arlange, having the delicacy, however, to omit absolutely the question of money, which had so strongly influenced the old lady.

"I see very plainly what effect this will have on my peace," said Claire sadly. "When my grandmother learns that I have not received your homage, she will be very angry."

"You misjudge me, mademoiselle," interrupted M. Daburon. "I have nothing to say to the marquise. I will retire, and all will be said. No doubt she will think that I have altered my mind!"

"Oh! you are good and generous, I know!"

"I will go away," pursued M. Daburon; "and soon you will have forgotten even the name of the unfortunate whose life's hopes have just been shattered."

"You do not mean what you say," said the young girl quickly.

"Well, no. I cherish this last illusion, that later on you will remember me with pleasure. Sometimes you will say, 'He loved me,' I wish all the same to remain your friend, yes, your most devoted friend."

Claire, in her turn, clasped M. Daburon's hands, and said with great emotion: "Yes, you are right, you must remain my friend. Let us forget what has happened, what you have said to-night, and remain to me, as in the past, the best, the most indulgent of brothers."

Darkness had come, and she could not see him; but she knew he was weeping, for he was slow to answer. "Is it possible," murmured he at length, "what you ask of me? What! is it you who talk to me of forgetting? Do you feel the power to forget? Do you not see that I love you a thousand times more than you love—" He stopped, unable to pronounce the name of Commarin; and then, with an effort he added: "And I shall love you always."

They had left the arbor, and were now standing not far from the steps leading to the house. "And now, mademoiselle," resumed M. Daburon, "permit me to say adieu! You will see me again but seldom. I shall only return often enough to avoid the appearance of a rupture." His voice trembled, so that it was with difficulty he made it distinct.

"Whatever may happen," he added, "remember that there is one unfortunate being in the world who belongs to you

absolutely. If ever you have need of a friend's devotion, come to me, come to your friend. Now it is over . . . I have courage. Claire, mademoiselle, for the last time, adieu!"

She was but little less moved than he was. Instinctively she approached him, and for the first and last time he touched lightly with his cold lips the forehead of her he loved so well. They mounted the steps, she leaning on his arm, and entered the rose-colored boudoir where the marquise was seated, impatiently shuffling the cards, while awaiting her victim. "Now, then, incorruptible magistrate," cried she.

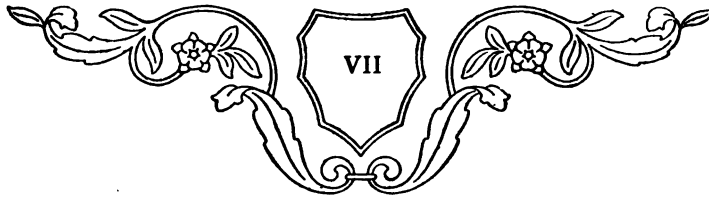
But M. Daburon felt sick at heart. He could not have held the cards. He stammered some absurd excuses, spoke of pressing affairs, of duties to be attended to, of feeling suddenly unwell, and went out, clinging to the walls. His departure made the old card-player highly indignant. She turned to her granddaughter, who had gone to hide her confusion away from the candles of the card table, and asked, "What is the matter with Daburon this evening?"

"I do not know, madame," stammered Claire.

"It appears to me," continued the marquise, "that the little magistrate permits himself to take singular liberties. He must be reminded of his proper place, or he will end by believing himself our equal."

Claire tried to explain the magistrate's conduct: "He has been complaining all the evening, grandmama; perhaps he is unwell."

"And what if he is?" exclaimed the old lady. "Is it not his duty to exercise some self-denial, in return for the honor of our company? I think I have already related to you the story of your granduncle, the Duc de St. Huruge, who, having been chosen to join the king's card party on their return from the chase, played all through the evening and lost with the best grace in the world two hundred and twenty pistoles. All the assembly remarked his gaiety and his good humor. On the following day only it was learned, that, during the hunt, he had fallen from his horse, and had sat at his majesty's card table with a broken rib. Nobody made any remark, so perfectly natural did this act of ordinary politeness appear in those days. This little Daburon, if he is unwell, would have given proof of his breeding by saying nothing about it, and remaining for my piquet. But he is as well as I am. Who can tell what games he has gone to play elsewhere!"



**M.** DABURON did not return home on leaving Mademoiselle d'Arlange. All through the night he wandered about at random, seeking to cool his heated brow, and to allay his excessive weariness. "Fool that I was!" said he to himself, "thousand times fool to have hoped, to have believed, that she would ever love me. Madman! how could I have dared to dream of possessing so much grace, nobleness, and beauty! How charming she was this evening, when her face was bathed in tears! Could anything be more angelic? What a sublime expression her eyes had in speaking of him! How she must love him! And I? She loves me as a father, she told me so—as a father! And could it be otherwise? Is it not justice? Could she see a lover in a sombre and severe-looking magistrate, always as sad as his black coat? Was it not a crime to dream of uniting that virginial simplicity to my detestable knowledge of the world? For her, the future is yet the land of smiling chimeras; and long since experience has dissipated all my illusions. She is young as innocence, and I am as old as vice."

The unfortunate magistrate felt thoroughly ashamed of himself. He understood Claire, and excused her. He reproached himself for having shown her how he suffered; for having cast a shadow upon her life. He could not forgive himself for having spoken of his love. Ought he not to have foreseen what had happened?—that she would refuse him, that he would thus deprive himself of the happiness of seeing her, of hearing her, and of silently adoring her? "A young and romantic girl," pursued he, "must have a lover she can dream of—whom she can caress in imagination, as an ideal, gratifying herself by seeing in him every great and brilliant quality, imagining him full of nobleness, of bravery, of heroism. What would she see, if, in my absence, she dreamed of me? Her imagination would present me dressed in a funeral robe, in the depth of a gloomy dungeon, engaged with some vile criminal.



Is it not my trade to descend into all moral sinks, to stir up the foulness of crime? Am I not compelled to wash in secrecy and darkness the dirty linen of the most corrupt members of society? Ah! some professions are fatal. Ought not the magistrate, like the priest, to condemn himself to solitude and celibacy? Both know all, they hear all, their costumes are nearly the same; but, while the priest carries consolation in the folds of his black robe, the magistrate conveys terror. One is mercy, the other chastisement. Such are the images a thought of me would awaken; while the other—the other—”

The wretched man continued his headlong course along the deserted quays. He went with his head bare, his eyes haggard. To breathe more freely, he had torn off his cravat and thrown it to the winds. Sometimes, unconsciously, he crossed the path of a solitary wayfarer, who would pause, touched with pity, and turn to watch the retreating figure of the unfortunate wretch he thought deprived of reason. In a by-road, near Grenelle, some police officers stopped him, and tried to question him. He mechanically tendered them his card. They read it, and permitted him to pass, convinced that he was drunk. Anger—a furious anger—began to replace his first feeling of resignation. In his heart arose a hate, stronger and more violent than even his love for Claire. That other, that preferred one, that haughty vicomte, who could not overcome those paltry obstacles, oh, that he had him there, under his knee! At that moment, this noble and proud man, this severe and grave magistrate, experienced an irresistible longing for vengeance. He began to understand the hate that arms itself with a knife, and lies in ambush in out-of-the-way places; which strikes in the dark, whether in front or from behind matters little, but which strikes, which kills, whose vengeance blood alone can satisfy. At that very hour he was supposed to be occupied with an inquiry into the case of an unfortunate, accused of having stabbed one of her wretched companions. She was jealous of the woman, who had tried to take her lover from her. He was a soldier, coarse in manners, and always drunk. M. Daburon felt himself seized with pity for this miserable creature, whom he had commenced to examine the day before. She was very ugly, in fact truly repulsive; but the expression of the eyes, when speaking of her soldier, returned to the magistrate's memory. “She loves him sincerely,” thought he. “If each one of the jurors had suffered what I am suffering now, she would

be acquitted. But how many men in this world have loved passionately? Perhaps not one in twenty." He resolved to recommend this girl to the indulgence of the tribunal, and to extenuate as much as possible her guilt. For he himself had just determined upon the commission of a crime. He was resolved to kill Albert de Commarin.

During the rest of the night he became all the more determined in this resolution, demonstrating to himself by a thousand mad reasons, which he found solid and inscrutable, the necessity for and the justifiableness of this vengeance. At seven o'clock in the morning, he found himself in an avenue of the Bois de Boulogne, not far from the lake. He made at once for the Porte Maillot, procured a cab, and was driven to his house. The delirium of the night continued, but without suffering. He was conscious of no fatigue. Calm and cool, he acted under the power of a hallucination, almost like a somnambulist. He reflected and reasoned, but without his reason. As soon as he arrived home he dressed himself with care, as was his custom formerly when visiting the Marquise d'Arlange, and went out. He first called at an armorer's and bought a small revolver, which he caused to be carefully loaded under his own eyes, and put it into his pocket. He then called on the different persons he supposed capable of informing him to what club the vicomte belonged. No one noticed the strange state of his mind, so natural were his manners and conversation. It was not until the afternoon that a young friend of his gave him the name of Albert de Commarin's club, and offered to conduct him thither, as he too was a member. M. Daburon accepted warmly, and accompanied his friend. While passing along, he grasped with frenzy the handle of the revolver which he kept concealed, thinking only of the murder he was determined to commit, and the means of insuring the accuracy of his aim. "This will make a terrible scandal," thought he, "above all if I do not succeed in blowing my own brains out. I shall be arrested, thrown into prison, and placed upon my trial at the assizes. My name will be dishonored! Bah! what does that signify? Claire does not love me, so what care I for all the rest? My father no doubt will die of grief, but I must have my revenge!"

On arriving at the club, his friend pointed out a very dark young man, with a haughty air, or what appeared so to him, who, seated at a table, was reading a review. It was the vi-

comte. M. Daburon walked up to him without drawing his revolver. But within two paces, his heart failed him; he turned suddenly and fled, leaving his friend astonished at a scene, to him, utterly inexplicable. Only once again will Albert de Commarin be as near death. On reaching the street, it seemed to M. Daburon that the ground was receding from beneath him, that everything was turning around him. He tried to cry out, but could not utter a sound; he struck at the air with his hands, reeled for an instant, and then fell all of a heap on the pavement. The passers-by ran and assisted the police to raise him. In one of his pockets they found his address, and carried him home.

When he recovered his senses, he was in his bed, at the foot of which he perceived his father. "What has happened?" he asked. With much caution they told him that for six weeks he had wavered between life and death. The doctors had declared his life saved; and, now that reason was restored, all would go well. Five minutes' conversation exhausted him. He shut his eyes, and tried to collect his ideas; but they whirled hither and thither wildly, as autumn leaves in the wind. The past seemed shrouded in a dark mist; yet, in the midst of the darkness and confusion, all that concerned Mademoiselle d'Arange stood out clear and luminous. All his actions from the moment when he embraced Claire appeared before him. He shuddered, and his hair was in a moment soaking with perspiration. He had almost become an assassin. The proof that he was restored to full possession of his faculties was that a question of criminal law crossed his brain. "The crime committed," said he to himself, "should I have been condemned? Yes. Was I responsible? No. Is crime merely the result of mental alienation? Was I mad? Or was I in that peculiar state of mind which usually precedes an illegal attempt? Who can say? Why have not all judges passed through an incomprehensible crisis such as mine? But who would believe me, were I to recount my experience?"

Some days later, he was sufficiently recovered to tell his father all. The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders, and assured him it was but a reminiscence of his delirium. The good old man was moved at the story of his son's luckless wooing, without seeing therein, however, an irreparable misfortune. He advised him to think of something else, placed at his disposal his entire fortune, and recommended him to marry a stout

Poitevine heiress, very gay and healthy, who would bear him some fine children. Then, as his estate was suffering by his absence, he returned home. Two months later, the investigating magistrate had resumed his ordinary avocations. But try as he would, he only went through his duties like a body without a soul. He felt that something was broken. Once he ventured to pay a visit to his old friend, the marquise. On seeing him, she uttered a cry of terror. She took him for a spectre, so much was he changed in appearance. As she dreaded dismal faces, she ever after shut her door to him. Claire was ill for a week after seeing him. "How he loved me," thought she; "it has almost killed him! Can Albert love me as much?" She did not dare to answer herself. She felt a desire to console him, to speak to him, attempt something; but he came no more.

M. Daburon was not, however, a man to give way without a struggle. He tried, as his father advised him, to distract his thoughts. He sought for pleasure, and found disgust, but not forgetfulness. Often he went as far as the threshold of debauchery; but the pure figure of Claire, dressed in white garments, always barred the doors against him. Then he took refuge in work, as in a sanctuary; condemned himself to the most incessant labor, and forbade himself to think of Claire, as the consumptive forbids himself to meditate upon his malady. His eagerness, his feverish activity, earned him the reputation of an ambitious man, who would go far; but he cared for nothing in the world. At length, he found, not rest, but that painless benumbing which commonly follows a great catastrophe. The convalescence of oblivion was commencing.

These were the events, recalled to M. Daburon's mind when old Tabaret pronounced the name of Commarin. He believed them buried under the ashes of time; and behold they reappeared, just the same as those characters traced in sympathetic ink when held before a fire. In an instant they unrolled themselves before his memory, with the instantaneousness of a dream annihilating time and space. During some minutes, he assisted at the representation of his own life. At once actor and spectator, he was there seated in his armchair, and at the same time he appeared on the stage. He acted, and he judged himself. His first thought, it must be confessed, was one of hate, followed by a detestable feeling of satisfaction. Chance had, so to say, delivered into his hands this man preferred by Claire, this man, now no longer a haughty nobleman, illus-

trious by his fortune and his ancestors, but the illegitimate offspring of a courtesan. To retain a stolen name, he had committed a most cowardly assassination. And he, the magistrate, was about to experience the infinite gratification of striking his enemy with the sword of justice. But this was only a passing thought. The man's upright conscience revolted against it, and made its powerful voice heard. "Is anything," it cried, "more monstrous than the association of these two ideas—hatred and justice? Can a magistrate, without despising himself more than he despises the vile beings he condemns, recollect that a criminal, whose fate is in his hands, has been his enemy? Has an investigating magistrate the right to make use of his exceptional powers in dealing with a prisoner, so long as he harbors the least resentment against him?" M. Daburon repeated to himself what he had so frequently thought during the year, when commencing a fresh investigation: "And I also, I almost stained myself with a vile murder!" And now it was his duty to cause to be arrested, to interrogate, and hand over to the assizes the man he had once resolved to kill. All the world, it is true, ignored this crime of thought and intention; but could he himself forget it? Was not this, of all others, a case in which he should decline to be mixed up? Ought he not to withdraw, and wash his hands of the blood that had been shed, leaving to another the task of avenging him in the name of society? "No," said he, "it would be a cowardice unworthy of me." A project of mad generosity occurred to the bewildered man. "If I save him," murmured he, "if for Claire's sake I leave him his honor and his life. But how can I save him? To do so I shall be obliged to suppress old Tabaret's discoveries, and make an accomplice of him by ensuring his silence. We shall have to follow a wrong track, join Gevrol in running after some imaginary murderer. Is this practicable? Besides, to spare Albert is to defame Noel; it is to assure impunity to the most odious of crimes. In short, it is still sacrificing justice to my feelings."

The magistrate suffered greatly. How choose a path in the midst of so many perplexities! Impelled by different interests, he wavered, undecided between the most opposite decisions, his mind oscillating from one extreme to the other. What could he do? His reason after this new and unforeseen shock vainly sought to regain its equilibrium. "Resign?" said he to himself. "Where, then, would be my courage? Ought I not rather to remain the representative of the law, incapable of emotion, in-

sensible to prejudice? Am I so weak that, in assuming my office, I am unable to divest myself of my personality? Can I not, for the present, make abstraction of the past? My duty is to pursue this investigation. Claire herself would desire me to act thus. Would she wed a man suspected of a crime? Never. If he is innocent, he will be saved; if guilty, let him perish!" This was very sound reasoning; but, at the bottom of his heart, a thousand disquietudes darted their thorns. He wanted to reassure himself. "Do I still hate this young man?" he continued. "No, certainly. If Claire has preferred him to me, it is to Claire and not to him I owe my suffering. My rage was no more than a passing fit of delirium. I will prove it by letting him find me as much a counselor as a magistrate. If he is not guilty, he shall make use of all the means in my power to establish his innocence. Yes, I am worthy to be his judge. Heaven, who reads all my thoughts, sees that I love Claire enough to desire with all my heart the innocence of her lover." Only then did M. Daburon seem to be vaguely aware of the lapse of time. It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. "Goodness!" cried he; "why, old Tabaret is waiting for me. I shall probably find him asleep."

But M. Tabaret was not asleep. He had noticed the passage of time no more than the magistrate. Ten minutes had sufficed him to take an inventory of the contents of M. Daburon's study, which was large, and handsomely furnished in accordance with his position and fortune. Taking up a lamp, he first admired six very valuable pictures, which ornamented the walls; he then examined with considerable curiosity some rare bronzes placed about the room, and bestowed on the bookcase the glance of a connoisseur. After which, taking an evening paper from the table, he approached the hearth, and seated himself in a vast armchair. He had not read a third of the leading article, which, like all leading articles of the time, was exclusively occupied with the Roman question, when, letting the paper drop from his hands, he became absorbed in meditation. The fixed idea, stronger than one's will, and more interesting to him than politics, brought him forcibly back to La Jonchere, where lay the body of Widow Lerouge. Like the child who again and again builds up and demolishes his house of cards, he arranged and entangled alternately his chain of inductions and arguments. In his own mind there was certainly no longer a doubt as regards this sad affair, and it seemed to him that M. Dabu-

ron shared his opinions. But yet, what difficulties there still remained to encounter! There exists between the investigating magistrate and the accused a supreme tribunal, an admirable institution which is a guarantee for all, a powerful moderator, the jury. And the jury, thank heaven! do not content themselves with a moral conviction. The strongest probabilities can not induce them to give an affirmative verdict. The accusation must then come before the jury, armed at all points, with abundant proofs. A task often tedious to the investigating magistrate, and bristling with difficulties, is the arrangement and condensation of this evidence, particularly when the accused is a cool hand, certain of having left no traces of his guilt. Even when presumptive evidence points clearly to the criminal, and common sense recognizes him, justice is at times compelled to acknowledge her defeat, for lack of what the jury consider sufficient proof of guilt. Thus, unhappily, many crimes escape punishment. An old advocate-general said one day that he knew as many as three assassins, living rich, happy, and respected, who would probably end by dying in their beds, surrounded by their families, and being followed to the grave with lamentations, and praised for their virtues in their epitaphs.

At the idea that a murderer might escape the penalty of his crime, and steal away from the assize court, old Tabaret's blood fairly boiled in his veins, as at the recollection of some deadly insult. Such a monstrous event, in his opinion, could only proceed from the incapacity of those charged with the preliminary inquiry, the clumsiness of the police, or the stupidity of the investigating magistrate. "It is not I," he muttered, with the satisfied vanity of success, "who would ever let my prey escape. No crime can be committed, of which the author can not be found, unless, indeed, he happens to be a madman, whose motive it would be difficult to understand. I would pass my life in pursuit of a criminal, before avowing myself vanquished, as Gevrol has done so many times." Assisted by chance, he had again succeeded, so he kept repeating to himself, but what proofs could he furnish to the accusation, to that confounded jury, so difficult to convince, so precise and so cowardly? What could he imagine to force so cunning a culprit to betray himself? What trap could he prepare? To what new and infallible stratagem could he have recourse? The amateur detective exhausted himself in subtle but impracticable combinations, always stopped by that exacting jury, so

obnoxious to the agents of the Rue de Jerusalem. He was so deeply absorbed in his thoughts that he did not hear the door open, and was utterly unconscious of the magistrate's presence.

M. Daburon's voice aroused him from his reverie. "You will excuse me, M. Tabaret, for having left you so long alone."

The old fellow rose and bowed respectfully. "By my faith, sir," replied he, "I have not had the leisure to perceive my solitude."

M. Daburon crossed the room, and seated himself, facing his agent before a small table encumbered with papers and documents relating to the crime. He appeared very much fatigued. "I have reflected a good deal," he commenced, "about this affair—"

"And I," interrupted old Tabaret, "was just asking myself what was likely to be the attitude assumed by the vicomte at the moment of his arrest. Nothing is more important, according to my idea, than his manner of conducting himself then. Will he fly into a passion? Will he attempt to intimidate the agents? Will he threaten to turn them out of the house? These are generally the tactics of titled criminals. My opinion, however, is that he will remain perfectly cool. He will declare himself the victim of a misunderstanding, and insist upon an immediate interview with the investigating magistrate. Once that is accorded him, he will explain everything very quickly."

The old fellow spoke of matters of speculation in such a tone of assurance that M. Daburon was unable to repress a smile. "We have not got as far as that yet," said he.

"But we shall, in a few hours," replied M. Tabaret quickly. "I presume you will order young M. de Commarin's arrest at daybreak."

The magistrate trembled, like the patient who sees the surgeon deposit his case of instruments upon the table on entering the room. The moment for action had come. He felt what a distance lies between a mental decision and the physical action required to execute it. "You are prompt, M. Tabaret," said he; "you recognize no obstacles."

"None, having ascertained the criminal. Who else can have committed this assassination? Who but he had an interest in silencing Widow Lerouge, in suppressing her testimony, in destroying her papers? He, and only he. Poor Noel! who is as dull as honesty, warned him, and he acted. Should we fail



to establish his guilt, he will remain De Commarin more than ever; and my young barrister will be Noel Gerdy to the grave."

"Yes, but—"

The old man fixed his eyes upon the magistrate with a look of astonishment. "You see, then, some difficulties, sir?" he asked.

"Most decidedly!" replied M. Daburon. "This is a matter demanding the utmost circumspection. In cases like the present, one must not strike until the blow is sure, and we have but presumptions. Suppose we are mistaken. Justice, unhappily, can not repair errors. Her hand once unjustly placed upon a man, leaves an imprint of dishonor that can never be effaced. She may perceive her error, and proclaim it aloud, but in vain! Public opinion, absurd and idiotic, will not pardon the man guilty of being suspected."

It was with a sinking heart that the old fellow listened to these remarks. He would not be withheld by such paltry considerations.

"Our suspicions are well grounded," continued the magistrate. "But, should they lead us into error, our precipitation would be a terrible misfortune for this young man, to say nothing of the effect it would have in abridging the authority and dignity of justice, of weakening the respect which constitutes her power. Such a mistake would call for discussion, provoke examination, and awaken distrust, at an epoch in our history when all minds are but too much disposed to defy the constituted authorities."

He leaned upon the table, and appeared to reflect profoundly. "I have no luck," thought old Tabaret. "I have to do with a trembler. When he should act, he makes speeches; instead of signing warrants, he propounds theories. He is astounded at my discovery, and is not equal to the situation. Instead of being delighted by my appearance with the news of our success, he would have given a twenty-franc piece, I dare say, to have been left undisturbed. Ah! he would very willingly have the little fishes in his net, but the big ones frighten him. The big fishes are dangerous, and he prefers to let them swim away."

"Perhaps," said M. Daburon, aloud, "it will suffice to issue a search-warrant, and a summons for the appearance of the accused."

"Then all is lost!" cried old Tabaret.

"And why, pray?"

"Because we are opposed by a criminal of marked ability. A most providential accident has placed us upon his track. If we give him time to breathe, he will escape."

The only answer was an inclination of the head, which M. Daburon may have intended for a sign of assent.

"It is evident," continued the old fellow, "that our adversary has foreseen everything, absolutely everything, even the possibility of suspicion attaching to one in his high position. Oh! his precautions are all taken. If you are satisfied with demanding his appearance, he is saved. He will appear before you as tranquilly as your clerk, as unconcerned as if he came to arrange the preliminaries of a duel. He will present you with a magnificent alibi, an alibi that can not be gainsaid. He will show you that he passed the evening and the night of Tuesday with personages of the highest rank. In short, his little machine will be so cleverly constructed, so nicely arranged, all its little wheels will play so well, that there will be nothing left for you but to open the door and usher him out with the most humble apologies. The only means of securing conviction is to surprise the miscreant by a rapidity against which it is impossible he can be on his guard. Fall upon him like a thunderclap, arrest him as he wakes, drag him hither while yet pale with astonishment, and interrogate him at once. Ah! I wish I were an investigating magistrate."

Old Tabaret stopped short, frightened at the idea that he had been wanting in respect; but M. Daburon showed no sign of being offended. "Proceed," said he, in a tone of encouragement, "proceed."

"Suppose, then," continued the detective, "I am the investigating magistrate. I cause my man to be arrested, and, twenty minutes later, he is standing before me. I do not amuse myself by putting questions to him, more or less subtle. No, I go straight to the mark. I overwhelm him at once by the weight of my certainty, prove to him so clearly that I know everything, that he must surrender, seeing no chance of escape. I should say to him: 'My good man, you bring me an alibi; it is very well; but I am acquainted with that system of defense. It will not do with me. I know all about the clocks that don't keep proper time, and all the people who never lost sight of you. In the mean time, this is what you did. At twenty minutes past eight, you slipped away adroitly; at thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at the St. Lazare station; at nine

o'clock, you alighted at the station at Rueil, and took the road to La Jonchere; at a quarter past nine, you knocked at the window-shutter of Widow Lerouge's cottage. You were admitted. You asked for something to eat, and, above all, something to drink. At twenty minutes past nine, you planted the well-sharpened end of a foil between her shoulders. You killed her! You then overturned everything in the house, and burned certain documents of importance; after which, you tied up in a napkin all the valuables you could find, and carried them off, to lead the police to believe the murder was the work of a robber. You locked the door, and threw away the key. Arrived at the Seine, you threw the bundle into the water, then hurried off to the railway station on foot, and at eleven o'clock you reappeared among your friends. Your game was well played; but you omitted to provide against two adversaries, a detective, not easily deceived, named Tiraclair, and another still more clever, named chance. Between them, they have got the better of you. Moreover, you were foolish to wear such small boots, and to keep on your lavender kid gloves, besides embarrassing yourself with a silk hat and an umbrella. Now confess your guilt, for it is the only thing left you to do, and I will give you permission to smoke in your dungeon some of those excellent trabucos you are so fond of, and which you always smoke with an amber mouthpiece.'" During this speech, M. Tabaret had gained at least a couple of inches in height, so great was his enthusiasm. He looked at the magistrate, as if expecting a smile of approbation. "Yes," continued he, after taking breath, "I would say that, and nothing else; and, unless this man is a hundred times stronger than I suppose him to be, unless he is made of bronze, of marble, or of steel, he would fall at my feet and avow his guilt."

"But supposing he were of bronze," said M. Daburon, "and did not fall at your feet, what would you do next?"

The question evidently embarrassed the old fellow. "Pshaw!" stammered he; "I don't know; I would see; I would search; but he would confess."

After a prolonged silence, M. Daburon took a pen, and hurriedly wrote a few lines. "I surrender," said he. "M. Albert de Commarin shall be arrested; that is settled. The different formalities to be gone through and the perquisitions will occupy some time, which I wish to employ in interrogating the Comte de Commarin, the young man's father, and your friend, M.

Noel Gerdy, the young barrister. The letters he possesses are indispensable to me."

At the name of Gerdy, M. Tabaret's face assumed a most comical expression of uneasiness. "Confound it," cried he, "the very thing I most dreaded."

"What?" asked M. Daburon.

"The necessity for the examination of those letters. Noel will discover my interference. He will despise me: he will fly from me, when he knows that Tabaret and Tiraucclair sleep in the same nightcap. Before eight days are past, my oldest friends will refuse to shake hands with me, as if it were not an honor to serve justice. I shall be obliged to change my residence, and assume a false name."

He almost wept, so great was his annoyance. M. Daburon was touched. "Reassure yourself, my dear M. Tabaret," said he. "I will manage that your adopted son, your Benjamin, shall know nothing. I will lead him to believe I have reached him by means of the widow's papers."

The old fellow seized the magistrate's hand in a transport of gratitude, and carried it to his lips. Oh! thanks, sir, a thousand thanks! I should like to be permitted to witness the arrest; and I shall be glad to assist at the perquisitions."

"I intended to ask you to do so, M. Tabaret," answered the magistrate. The lamps paled in the gray dawn of the morning; already the rumbling of vehicles was heard; Paris was awaking. "I have no time to lose," continued M. Daburon, "if I would have all my measures well taken. I must at once see the public prosecutor, whether he is up or not. I shall go direct from his house to the Palais de Justice, and be there before eight o'clock; and I desire, M. Tabaret, that you will there await my orders."

The old fellow bowed his thanks and was about to leave, when the magistrate's servant appeared. "Here is a note, sir," said he, "which a gendarme has just brought from Bougival. He waits an answer."

"Very well," replied M. Daburon. "Ask the man to have some refreshment; at least offer him a glass of wine."

He opened the envelope. "Ah!" he cried, "a letter from Gevrol;" and he read: "To the investigating magistrate. Sir, I have the honor to inform you that I am on the track of the man with the earrings. I heard of him at a wine-shop, which he entered on Sunday morning, before going to Widow Le-

rouge's cottage. He bought and paid for two litres of wine; then, suddenly striking his forehead, he cried: "Old fool! to forget that to-morrow is the boat's fete day!" and immediately called for three more litres. According to the almanac the boat must be called the "Saint-Marin." I have also learned that she was laden with grain. I write to the Prefecture at the same time as I write to you, that inquiries may be made at Paris and Rouen. He will be found at one of those places. I am in waiting, sir, etc."

"Poor Gevrol!" cried old Tabaret, bursting with laughter. "He sharpens his sabre, and the battle is over. Are you not going to put a stop to his inquiries, sir?"

"No; certainly not," answered M. Daburon; "to neglect the slightest clue often leads one into error. Who can tell what light we may receive from this mariner?"



ON the same day that the crime of La Jonchere was discovered, and precisely at the hour that M. Tabaret made his memorable examination in the victim's chamber, the Vicomte Albert de Commarin entered his carriage, and proceeded to the Northern Railway station, to meet his father. The young man was very pale: his pinched features, his dull eyes, his blanched lips, in fact, his whole appearance, denoted either overwhelming fatigue or unusual sorrow. All the servants had observed that, during the past five days, their young master had not been in his ordinary condition: he spoke but little, ate almost nothing, and refused to see any visitors. His valet noticed that this singular change dated from the visit, on Sunday morning, of a certain M. Noel Gerdy, who had been closeted with him for three hours in the library. The vicomte, gay as a lark until the arrival of this person, had, from the moment of his departure, the appearance of a man at the point of death. When setting forth to meet his father, the vicomte appeared to suffer so acutely that M. Lubin, his valet, entreated him not to go out; suggesting that it would be more prudent to retire to his room,

and call in the doctor. But the Comte de Commarin was exacting on the score of filial duty, and would overlook the worst of youthful indiscretions sooner than what he termed a want of reverence. He had announced his intended arrival by telegraph, twenty-four hours in advance; therefore the house was expected to be in perfect readiness to receive him, and the absence of Albert at the railway station would have been resented as a flagrant omission of duty. The vicomte had been but five minutes in the waiting-room, when the bell announced the arrival of the train. Soon the doors leading on to the platform were opened, and the travelers crowded in. The throng beginning to thin a little, the comte appeared, followed by a servant, who carried a traveling pelisse lined with rare and valuable fur.

The Comte de Commarin looked a good ten years less than his age. His beard and hair, yet abundant, were scarcely gray. He was tall and muscular, held himself upright, and carried his head high. His appearance was noble, his movements easy. His regular features presented a study to the physiognomist, all expressing easy, careless good nature, even to the handsome, smiling mouth; but in his eyes flashed the fiercest and the most arrogant pride. This contrast revealed the secret of his character. Imbued quite as deeply with aristocratic prejudice as the Marquise d'Arlange, he had progressed with his century or at least appeared to have done so. As fully as the marquise, he held in contempt all who were not noble; but his disdain expressed itself in a different fashion. The marquise proclaimed her contempt loudly and coarsely; the comte had kept eyes and ears open and had seen and heard a good deal. She was stupid, and without a shade of common sense. He was witty and sensible, and possessed enlarged views of life and politics. She dreamed of the return of the absurd traditions of a former age; he hoped for things within the power of events to bring forth. He was sincerely persuaded that the nobles of France would yet recover slowly and silently, but surely, all their lost power, with its prestige and influence. In a word, the comte was the flattered portrait of his class; the marquise its caricature. It should be added that M. de Commarin knew how to divest himself of his crushing urbanity in the company of his equals. There he recovered his true character, haughty, self-sufficient, and intractable, enduring contradiction pretty much as a wild horse the application of the spur. In his own house, he was a despot.

Perceiving his father, Albert advanced toward him. They shook hands and embraced with an air as noble as ceremonious, and, in less than a minute, had exchanged all the news that had transpired during the comte's absence. Then only did M. de Commarin perceive the alteration in his son's face. "You are unwell, vicomte," said he.

"Oh, no, sir," answered Albert, laconically.

The comte uttered "Ah!" accompanied by a certain movement of the head, which, with him, expressed perfect incredulity; then, turning to his servant, he gave him some orders briefly. "Now," resumed he, "let us go quickly to the house. I am in haste to feel at home; and I am hungry, having had nothing to-day but some detestable broth, at I know not what way station."

M. de Commarin had returned to Paris in a very bad temper, his journey to Austria had not brought the results he had hoped for. To crown his dissatisfaction, he had rested, on his homeward way, at the chateau of an old friend, with whom he had had so violent a discussion that they had parted without shaking hands. The comte was hardly seated in his carriage before he entered upon the subject of this disagreement. "I have quarreled with the Duc de Sairmeuse," said he to his son.

"That seems to me to happen whenever you meet," answered Albert, without intending any raillery.

"True," said the comte: "but this is serious. I passed four days at his country-seat, in a state of inconceivable exasperation. He has entirely forfeited my esteem. Sairmeuse has sold his estate of Gondresy, one of the finest in the north of France. He has cut down the timber, and put up to auction the old chateau, a princely dwelling, which is to be converted into a sugar refinery; all this for the purpose, as he says, of raising money to increase his income!"

"And was that the cause of your rupture?" inquired Albert, without much surprise.

"Certainly it was! Do you not think it is a sufficient one?"

"But, sir, you know the duke has a large family, and is far from rich."

"What of that? A French noble who sells his land commits an unworthy act. He is guilty of treason against his order!"—

"Oh, sir," said Albert, deprecatingly.

"I said treason!" continued the comte. "I maintain the word. Remember well, vicomte, power has been, and always will be,

on the side of wealth, especially on the side of those who hold the soil. The men of '93 well understood this principle, and acted upon it. By impoverishing the nobles, they destroyed their prestige more effectually than by abolishing their titles. A prince dismounted, and without footmen, is no more than any one else."

The carriage at this moment stopped in the courtyard of the De Commarin mansion, after having described that perfect half-circle, the glory of coachmen who preserve the old tradition. The comte alighted first, and, leaning upon his son's arm, ascended the steps of the grand entrance. In the immense vestibule nearly all the servants, dressed in rich liveries, stood in a line. The comte gave them a glance in passing, as an officer might his soldiers on parade, and proceeded to his apartment on the first floor, above the reception rooms. Never was there a better regulated household than that of the Comte de Commarin. He possessed in a high degree the art, more rare than is generally supposed, of commanding an army of servants. The number of his domestics caused him neither inconvenience nor embarrassment. They were necessary to him. So perfect was the organization of this household that its functions were performed like those of a machine: without noise, variation, or effort.

M. de Commarin had hardly removed the traces of his journey, and changed his dress, when his butler announced that the dinner was served. He went down at once; and father and son met upon the threshold of the dining-room. This was a large apartment, with a very high ceiling, as were all the rooms of the ground floor, and was most magnificently furnished. The comte was not only a great eater, but was vain of his enormous appetite. He was fond of recalling the names of great men noted for their capacity of stomach. Charles V devoured mountains of viands. Louis XIV swallowed at each repast as much as six ordinary men would eat at a meal. He pretended that one can almost judge of men's qualities by their digestive capacities; he compared them to lamps, whose power of giving light is in proportion to the oil they consume. During the first half-hour the comte and his son both remained silent. M. de Commarin ate conscientiously, not perceiving or not caring to notice that Albert ate nothing, but merely sat at the table as if to countenance him. The old nobleman's ill-humor and volubility returned with the dessert, apparently increased by a Burgundy of which he was particularly fond, and of which he



drank freely. He was partial, moreover, to an after-dinner argument, professing a theory that moderate discussion is a perfect digestive. A letter which had been delivered to him on his arrival, and which he had found time to glance over, gave him at once a subject and a point of departure. "I arrived home but an hour ago," said he, "and I have already received a homily from Broisfresnay."

"He writes a great deal," observed Albert.

"Too much; he consumes himself in ink. He mentions a lot more of his ridiculous projects and vain hopes; and he mentions a dozen names of men of his own stamp who are his associates. On my word of honor, they seem to have lost their senses! They talk of lifting the world, only they want a lever and something to rest it on. It makes me die with laughter!" For ten minutes the comte continued to discharge a volley of abuse and sarcasm against his best friends without seeming to see that a great many of their foibles which he ridiculed were also a little his own. "If," continued he more seriously—"if they only possessed a little confidence in themselves, if they showed the least audacity! But no! they count upon others to do for them what they ought to do for themselves. In short, their proceedings are a series of confessions of helplessness, of premature declarations of failure."

The coffee having been served, the comte made a sign, and the servants left the room.

"No," continued he; "I see but one hope for the French aristocracy, but one plank of salvation, one good little law, establishing the right of primogeniture."

"You will never obtain it."

"You think not? Would you then oppose such a measure, vicomte?" Albert knew by experience what dangerous ground his father was approaching, and remained silent. "Let us put it, then, that I dream of the impossible!" resumed the comte. "Then let the nobles do their duty. Let all the younger sons and the daughters of our great families forego their rights, by giving up their entire patrimony to the first-born for five generations, contenting themselves each with a couple of thousand francs a year. By that means great fortunes can be reconstructed, and families, instead of being divided by a variety of interests, become united by one common desire."

"Unfortunately," objected the vicomte, "the time is not favorable to such devotedness."

"I know it, sir," replied the comte quickly; "and in my own house I have the proof of it. I, your father, have conjured you to give up all idea of marrying the granddaughter of that old fool, the Marquise d'Arlange. And all to no purpose; for I have at last been obliged to yield to your wishes."

"Father—" Albert commenced. "It is well," interrupted the comte. "You have my word; but remember my prediction: you will strike a fatal blow at our house. You will be one of the largest proprietors in France; but have half a dozen children, and they will be hardly rich. If they also have as many, you will probably see your grandchildren in poverty!"

"You put all at the worst, father."

"Without doubt: it is the only means of pointing out the danger and averting the evil. You talk of your life's happiness. What is that? A true noble thinks of his name above all. Mademoiselle d'Arlange is very pretty and very attractive, but she is penniless. I had found an heiress for you."

"Whom I should never love!"

"And what of that? She would have brought you four millions in her apron—more than the kings of to-day give their daughters. Besides which she had great expectations."

The discussion upon this subject would have been interminable had Albert taken an active share in it; but his thoughts were far away. He answered from time to time, so as not to appear absolutely dumb, and then only a few syllables. This absence of opposition was more irritating to the comte than the most obstinate contradiction. He, therefore, directed his utmost efforts to excite his son to argue. However he was vainly prodigal of words and unsparing in unpleasant allusions, so that at last he fairly lost his temper, and, on receiving a laconic reply, he burst forth: "Upon my word, the butler's son would say the same as you! What blood have you in your veins? You are more like one of the people than a Vicomte de Commarin!"

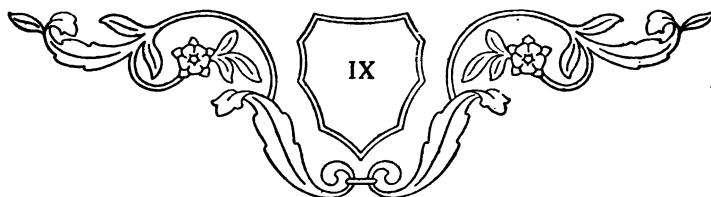
There are certain conditions of mind in which the least conversation jars upon the nerves. During the last hour Albert had suffered an intolerable punishment. The patience with which he had armed himself at last escaped him. "Well, sir," he answered, "if I resemble one of the people, there are perhaps good reasons for it." The glance with which the vicomte accompanied his speech was so expressive that the comte experienced a sudden shock. All his animation forsook him, and in

a hesitating voice he asked: "What is that you say, vicomte?" Albert had no sooner uttered the sentence than he regretted his precipitation, but he had gone too far to stop.

"Sir," he replied with some embarrassment, "I have to acquaint you with some important matters. My honor, yours, the honor of our house, are involved. I intended postponing this conversation till to-morrow, not desiring to trouble you on the evening of your return. However, as you wish me to explain, I will do so."

The comte listened with ill-concealed anxiety. He seemed to have divined what his son was about to say, and was terrified at himself for having divined it. "Believe me, sir," continued Albert slowly, "whatever may have been your acts, my voice will never be raised to reproach you. Your constant kindness to me—" M. de Commarin held up his hand. "A truce to preambles; let me have the facts without phrases," said he sternly.

Albert was some time without answering; he hesitated how to commence. "Sir," said he at length, "during your absence I have read all your correspondence with Madame Gerdy. *All!*" added he, emphasizing the word, already so significant. The comte, as though stung by a serpent, started up with such violence that he overturned his chair. "Not another word!" cried he in a terrible voice. "I forbid you to speak!" But he no doubt soon felt ashamed of his violence, for he quietly raised his chair, and resumed in a tone which he strove to render light and rallying: "Who will hereafter refuse to believe in presentiments? A couple of hours ago, on seeing your pale face at the railway station, I felt that you had learned more or less of this affair. I was sure of it." There was a long silence. With one accord, father and son avoided letting their eyes meet, lest they might encounter glances too eloquent to bear at so painful a moment. "You were right, sir," continued the comte, "our honor is involved. It is important that we should decide on our future conduct without delay. Will you follow me to my room?" He rang the bell, and a footman appeared almost immediately. "Neither the vicomte nor I am at home to any one," said M. de Commarin, "no matter whom."



THE revelation which had just taken place irritated much more than it surprised the Comte de Commarin. For twenty years he had been constantly expecting to see the truth brought to light. He knew that there can be no secret so carefully guarded that it may not by some chance escape; and his had been known to four people, three of whom were still living. He had not forgotten that he had been imprudent enough to trust it to paper, knowing all the while that it ought never to have been written. How was it that he, a prudent diplomat, a statesman, full of precaution, had been so foolish? How was it that he had allowed this fatal correspondence to remain in existence! Why had he not destroyed, at no matter what cost, these overwhelming proofs, which sooner or later might be used against him? Such imprudence could only have arisen from an absurd passion, blind and insensible, even to madness. So long as he was Valerie's lover, the comte never thought of asking the return of his letters from his beloved accomplice. If the idea had occurred to him, he would have repelled it as an insult to the character of his angel. What reason could he have had to suspect her discretion? None. He would have been much more likely to suppose her desirous of removing every trace, even the slightest, of what had taken place. Was it not her son who had received the benefits of the deed, who had usurped another's name and fortune? When eight years after, believing her to be unfaithful, the comte had put an end to the connection which had given him so much happiness he thought of obtaining possession of this unhappy correspondence. But he knew not how to do so. A thousand reasons prevented him moving in the matter. The principal one was that he did not wish to see this woman once so dearly loved. He did not feel sufficiently sure either of his anger or of his firmness. Could he, without yielding, resist the tearful pleading of those eyes which had so long held complete sway over him? To look again upon this mistress of his youth would,

he feared, result in his forgiving her; and he had been too cruelly wounded in his pride and in his affection to admit the idea of a reconciliation. On the other hand, to obtain the letters through a third party was entirely out of the question. He abstained, then, from all action, postponing it indefinitely. "I will go to her," said he to himself; "but not until I have so torn her from my heart that she will have become indifferent to me. I will not gratify her with the sight of my grief." So months and years passed on; and finally he began to say and believe that it was too late. And for now more than twenty years he had never passed a day without cursing his inexcusable folly. Never had he been able to forget that above his head a danger more terrible than the sword of Damocles hung, suspended by a thread, which the slightest accident might break. And now that thread had broken. Often, when considering the possibility of such a catastrophe, he had asked himself how he should avert it? He had formed and rejected many plans: he had deluded himself, like all men of imagination, with innumerable chimerical projects, and now he found himself quite unprepared.

Albert stood respectfully, while his father sat in his great armorial chair, just beneath the large frame in which the genealogical tree of the illustrious family of Rheteau de Commarin spread its luxuriant branches. The old gentleman completely concealed the cruel apprehensions which oppressed him. He seemed neither irritated nor dejected; but his eyes expressed a haughtiness more than usually disdainful, and a self-reliance full of contempt. "Now, vicomte," he began in a firm voice, "explain yourself. I need say nothing to you of the position of a father, obliged to blush before his son; you understand it and will feel for me. Let us spare each other and try to be calm. Tell me how did you obtain your knowledge of this correspondence?"

Albert had had time to recover himself and prepare for the present struggle, as he had impatiently waited four days for this interview. The difficulty he experienced in uttering the first words had now given place to a dignified and proud demeanor. He expressed himself clearly and forcibly, without losing himself in those details which in serious matters needlessly defer the real point at issue. "Sir," he replied, "on Sunday morning a young man called here, stating that he had business with me of the utmost importance. I received him.

He then revealed to me that I, alas! am only your natural son, substituted, through your affection, for the legitimate child borne you by Madame de Commarin."

"And did you not have this man kicked out of doors?" exclaimed the comte.

"No, sir. I was about to answer him very sharply, of course; but, presenting me with a packet of letters, he begged me to read them before replying."

"Ah!" cried M. de Commarin, "you should have thrown them into the fire, for there was a fire, I suppose? You held them in your hands, and they still exist? Why was I not there?"

"Sir!" said Albert reproachfully. And, recalling the position Noel had occupied against the mantelpiece, and the manner in which he stood, he added: "Even if the thought had occurred to me, it was impracticable. Besides, at the first glance, I recognized your handwriting. I, therefore, took the letters and read them."—"And then?"—"And then, sir, I returned the correspondence to the young man, and asked for a delay of eight days; not to think over it myself—there was no need of that—but because I judged an interview with you indispensable. Now, therefore, I beseech you, tell me whether this substitution really did take place."

"Certainly it did," replied the comte violently; "yes, certainly. You know that it did, for you have read what I wrote to Madame Gerdy, your mother." Albert had foreseen, had expected this reply; but it crushed him nevertheless. There are misfortunes so great that one must constantly think of them to believe in their existence. This flinching, however, lasted but an instant. "Pardon me, sir," he replied; "I was almost convinced, but I had not received a formal assurance of it. All the letters that I read spoke distinctly of your purpose, detailed your plan minutely; but not one pointed to, or in any way confirmed, the execution of your project."

The comte gazed at his son with a look of intense surprise. He recollected distinctly all the letters; and he could remember that, in writing to Valerie, he had over and over again rejoiced at their success, thanking her for having acted in accordance with his wishes. "You did not go to the end of them, then, vicomte," he said; "you did not read them all?"

"Every line, sir, and with an attention that you may well understand. The last letter shown me simply announced to Madame Gerdy the arrival of Claudine Lerouge, the nurse who

was charged with accomplishing the substitution. I know nothing beyond that."

"These proofs amount to nothing," muttered the comte. "A man may form a plan, cherish it for a long time, and at the last moment abandon it; it often happens so." He reproached himself for having answered so hastily. Albert had had only serious suspicions, and he had changed them to certainty. What stupidity! "There can be no possible doubt," he said to himself; "Valerie has destroyed the most conclusive letters, those which appeared to her the most dangerous, those I wrote after the substitution. But why has she preserved these others, compromising enough in themselves? and why, after having preserved them, has she let them go out of her possession?" Without moving, Albert awaited a word from the comte. What would it be? No doubt the old nobleman was at that moment deciding what he should do. "Perhaps she is dead!" said M. de Commarin aloud. And at the thought that Valerie was dead, without his having again seen her, he started painfully. His heart, after more than twenty years of voluntary separation, still suffered, so deeply rooted was this first love of his youth. He had cursed her; at this moment he pardoned her. True, she had deceived him; but did he not owe to her the only years of happiness he had ever known? Had she not formed all the poetry of his youth? Had he experienced, since leaving her, one single hour of joy or forgetfulness? In his present frame of mind, his heart retained only happy memories, like a vase which, once filled with precious perfumes, retains the odor until it is destroyed. "Poor woman!" he murmured. He sighed deeply. Three or four times his eyelids trembled, as if a tear were about to fall. Albert watched him with anxious curiosity. This was the first time since the vicomte had grown to man's estate that he had surprised in his father's countenance other emotion than ambition or pride, triumphant or defeated.

But M. de Commarin was not the man to yield long to sentiment. "You have not told me, vicomte," he said, "who sent you that messenger of misfortune."

"He came in person, sir, not wishing, he told me, to mix any others up in this sad affair. The young man was no other than he whose place I have occupied—your legitimate son, M. Noel Gerdy himself."

"Yes," said the comte in a low tone, "Noel, that is his name,

I remember." And then, with evident hesitation, he added: "Did he speak to you of his—of your mother?"

"Scarcely, sir. He only told me that he came unknown to her; that he had accidentally discovered the secret which he revealed to me."

M. de Commarin asked nothing further. There was more for him to learn. He remained for some time deep in thought. The decisive moment had come, and he saw but one way to escape. "Come, vicomte," he said in a tone so affectionate that Albert was astonished, "do not stand; sit down here by me, and let us discuss this matter. Let us unite our efforts to shun, if possible, this great misfortune. Confide in me, as a son should in his father. Have you thought of what is to be done? have you formed any determination?"

"It seems to me, sir, that hesitation is impossible."

"In what way?"

"My duty, father, is very plain. Before your legitimate son, I ought to give way without a murmur, if not without regret. Let him come. I am ready to yield to him everything that I have so long kept from him without a suspicion of the truth—his father's love, his fortune, and his name."

At this most praiseworthy reply the old nobleman could scarcely preserve the calmness he had recommended to his son in the earlier part of the interview. His face grew purple, and he struck the table with his fist more furiously than he had ever done in his life. He, usually so guarded, so decorous on all occasions, uttered a volley of oaths that would not have done discredit to an old cavalry officer. "And I tell you, sir, that this dream of yours shall never take place. No; that it shan't. I swear it. I promise you, whatever happens, understand, that things shall remain as they are; because it is my will. You are Vicomte de Commarin; and Vicomte de Commarin you shall remain, in spite of yourself, if necessary. You shall retain the title to your death, or at least to mine; for never, while I live, shall your absurd idea be carried out."

"But, sir," began Albert timidly.

"You are very daring to interrupt me while I am speaking, sir," exclaimed the comte. "Do I not know all your objections beforehand? You are going to tell me that it is a revolting injustice, a wicked robbery. I confess it, and grieve over it more than you possibly can. Do you think that I now for the first time repent of my youthful folly? For twenty years, sir,



I have lamented my true son; for twenty years I have cursed the wickedness of which he is the victim. And yet I learned how to keep silence, and to hide the sorrow and remorse which have covered my pillow with thorns. In a single instant your senseless yielding would render my long sufferings of no avail. No, I will never permit it!" The comte read a reply on his son's lips: he stopped him with a withering glance. "Do you think," he continued, "that I have never wept over the thought of my legitimate son passing his life struggling for a competence? Do you think that I have never felt a burning desire to repair the wrong done him? There have been times, sir, when I would have given half of my fortune simply to embrace that child of a wife too tardily appreciated. The fear of casting a shadow of suspicion upon your birth prevented me. I have sacrificed myself to the great name I bear. I received it from my ancestors without a stain. May you hand it down to your children equally spotless! Your first impulse was a worthy one, generous and noble; but you must forget it. Think of the scandal if our secret should be disclosed to the public gaze. Can you not foresee the joy of our enemies, of that herd of upstarts which surround us? I shudder at the thought of the odium and the ridicule which would cling to our name. Too many families already have stains upon their escutcheons; I will have none on mine." M. de Commarin remained silent for several minutes, during which Albert did not dare say a word, so much had he been accustomed since infancy to respect the least wish of the terrible old gentleman. "There is no possible way out of it," continued the comte. "Can I discard you tomorrow and present this Noel as my son, saying, 'Excuse me, but there has been a slight mistake; this one is the vicomte?' And then the tribunals will get hold of it. What does it matter who is named Benoit, Durand, or Bernard? But when one is called Commarin, even but for a single day, one must retain that name through life. The same moral does not do for every one; because we have not the same duties to perform. In our position errors are irreparable. Take courage, then, and show yourself worthy of the name you bear. The storm is upon you; raise your head to meet it." Albert's impassibility contributed not a little to increase M. de Commarin's irritation. Firm in an unchangeable resolution, the vicomte listened like one fulfilling a duty: and his face reflected no emotion. The comte saw that he was not shaken. "What have you to reply?" he asked.

"It seems to me, sir, that you have no idea of all the dangers which I foresee. It is difficult to master the revolts of conscience."

"Indeed!" interrupted the comte contemptuously; "your conscience revolts, does it? It has chosen its time badly. Your scruples come too late. So long as you saw that your inheritance consisted of an illustrious title and a dozen or so of millions, it pleased you. To-day the name appears to you laden with a heavy fault, a crime, if you will; and your conscience revolts. Renounce this folly. Children, sir, are accountable to their fathers; and they should obey them. Willing or unwilling, you must be my accomplice; willing or unwilling, you must bear the burden as I have borne it. And, however much you may suffer, be assured your sufferings can never approach what I have endured for so many years."

"Ah, sir!" cried Albert, "it is then I, the dispossessor, who has made this trouble? is it not, on the contrary, the dispossessed! It is not I whom you have to convince, it is M. Neol Gerdy."

"Noel!" repeated the comte.

"Your legitimate son, yes, sir. You act as if the issue of this unhappy affair depended solely upon my will. Do you then, imagine that M. Gerdy will be so easily disposed of, so easily silenced? And, if he should raise his voice, do you hope to move him by the considerations you have just mentioned?"

"I do not fear him."

"Then you are wrong, sir, permit me to tell you. Suppose for a moment that this young man has a soul sufficiently noble to relinquish his claim upon your rank and your fortune. Is there not the accumulated rancor of years to urge him to oppose you? He can not help feeling a fierce resentment for the horrible injustice of which he has been the victim. He must passionately long for vengeance, or rather reparation."

"He has no proofs."

"He has your letters, sir."

"They are not decisive, you yourself have told me so."

"That is true, sir; and yet they convinced me, who have an interest in not being convinced. Besides, if he needs witnesses, he will find them."

"Who? Yourself, vicomte?"

"Yourself, sir. The day when he wishes it, you will betray us. Suppose you were summoned before a tribunal, and that

there, under oath, you should be required to speak the truth, what answer would you make?" M. de Commarin's face darkened at this very natural supposition. He hesitated, he whose honor was usually so great. "I would save the name of my ancestors," he said at last. Albert shook his head doubtfully. "At the price of a lie, my father," he said. "I never will believe it. But let us suppose even that. He will then call Madame Gerdy."

"Oh, I will answer for her!" cried the comte, "her interests are the same as ours. If necessary, I will see her. Yes," he added with an effort, "I will call on her, I will speak to her; and I will guarantee that she will not betray us."

"And Claudine," continued the young man; "will she be silent, too?"

"For money, yes; and I will give her whatever she asks."

"And you would trust, father, to a paid silence, as if one could ever be sure of a purchased conscience? What is sold to you may be sold to another. A certain sum may close her mouth; a larger will open it."

"I will frighten her."

"You forget, father, that Claudine Lerouge was Noel Gerdy's nurse, that she takes an interest in his happiness, that she loves him. How do you know that he has not already secured her aid? She lives at Bougival. I went there, I remember, with you. No doubt, he sees her often; perhaps it is she who put him on the track of this correspondence. He spoke to me of her, as though he were sure of her testimony. He almost proposed my going to her for information."

"Alas!" cried the comte, "why is not Claudine dead instead of my faithful Germain?"

"You see, sir," concluded Albert, "Claudine Lerouge would alone render all your efforts useless."

"Ah, no!" cried the comte, "I shall find some expedient." The obstinate old gentleman was not willing to give in to this argument, the very clearness of which blinded him. The pride of his blood paralyzed his usual practical good sense. To acknowledge that he was conquered humiliated him, and seemed to him unworthy of himself. He did not remember to have met during his long career an invincible resistance or an absolute impediment. He was like all men of imagination, who fall in love with their projects, and who expect them to succeed on all occasions, as if wishing hard was all that was

necessary to change their dreams into realities. Albert this time broke the silence, which threatened to be prolonged. "I see, sir," he said, "that you fear, above all things, the publicity of this sad history; the possible scandal renders you desperate. But, unless we yield, the scandal will be terrible. There will be a trial which will be the talk of all Europe. The newspapers will print the facts, accompanied by heavens knows what comments of their own. Our name, however the trial results, will appear in all the papers of the world. This might be borne, if we were sure of succeeding; but we are bound to lose, my father, we shall lose. Then think of the exposure! think of the dishonor branded upon us by public opinion."

"I think," said the comte, "that you can have neither respect nor affection for me, when you speak in that way."

"It is my duty, sir, to point out to you the evils I see threatening, and which there is yet time to shun. M. Noel Gerdy is your legitimate son, recognize him, acknowledge his just pretensions, and receive him. We can make the change very quietly. It is easy to account for it, through a mistake of the nurse, Claudine Lerouge, for instance. All parties being agreeable, there can be no trouble about it. What is to prevent the new Vicomte de Commarin from quitting Paris, and disappearing for a time? He might travel about Europe for four or five years; by the end of that time, all will be forgotten, and no one will remember me."

M. de Commarin was not listening; he was deep in thought. "But instead of contesting, vicomte," he cried, "we might compromise. We may be able to purchase these letters. What does this young fellow want? A position and a fortune? I will give him both. I will make him as rich as he can wish. I will give him a million; if need be, two, three—half of all I possess. With money, you see, much money—"

"Spare him, sir; he is your son."

"Unfortunately! and I wish him to the devil! I will see him, and he will agree to what I wish. I will prove to him the bad policy of the earthen pot struggling with the iron kettle; and, if he is not a fool, he will understand. The comte rubbed his hands while speaking. He was delighted with this brilliant plan of negotiation. It could not fail to result favorably. A crowd of arguments occurred to his mind in support of it. He would buy back again his lost rest. But Albert did not seem to share his father's hopes. "You

will perhaps think it unkind in me, sir," said he, sadly, "to dispel this last illusion of yours; but I must. Do not delude yourself with the idea of an amicable arrangement; the awakening will only be the more painful. I have seen M. Gerdy, my father, and he is not one, I assure you, to be intimidated. If there is an energetic will in the world, it is his. He is truly your son; and his expression, like yours, shows an iron resolution, that may be broken but never bent. I can still hear his voice trembling with resentment, while he spoke to me. I can still see the dark fire of his eyes. No, he will never accept a compromise. He will have all or nothing; and I can not say that he is wrong. If you resist, he will attack you without the slightest consideration. Strong in his rights, he will cling to you with stubborn animosity. He will drag you from court to court; he will not stop short of utter defeat or complete triumph." Accustomed to absolute obedience from his son, the old nobleman was astounded at this unexpected obstinacy. "What is your object in saying all this?" he asked.

"It is this, sir. I should utterly despise myself, if I did not spare your old age this greatest of calamities. Your name does not belong to me; I will take my own. I am your natural son; I will give up my place to your legitimate son. Permit me to withdraw with at least the honor of having freely done my duty. Do not force me to wait till I am driven out in disgrace."

"What!" cried the comte, stunned, "you will abandon me? You refuse to help me, you turn against me, you recognize the rights of this man in spite of my wishes?"

Albert bowed his head. He was much moved, but still remained firm. "My resolution is irrevocably taken," he replied. "I can never consent to dispossess your son."

"Cruel, ungrateful boy!" cried M. de Commarin. His wrath was such, that, when he found he could do nothing by abuse, he passed at once to jeering. "But no," he continued, "you are great, you are noble, you are generous; you are acting after the most approved pattern of chivalry, vicomte, I should say, my dear M. Gerdy; after the fashion of Plutarch's time! So you give up my name and my fortune, and you leave me. You will shake the dust from your shoes upon the threshold of my house, and you will go out into the world. I see only one difficulty in your way. How do you expect to live, my stoic philosopher? Have you a trade at your fingers' ends, like Jean

Jacques Rousseau's Emile? Or, worthy M. Gerdy, have you learned economy from the four thousand francs a month I allow you for waxing your mustache? Perhaps you have made money on the Bourse! Then my name must have seemed very burdensome to you to bear, since you so eagerly introduced it into such a place! Has dirt, then, so great an attraction for you that you must jump from your carriage so quickly? Say, rather, that the company of my friends embarrasses you, and that you are anxious to go where you will be among your own equals."

"I am very wretched, sir," replied Albert to this avalanche of insults, "and you would crush me!"

"You wretched? Well, whose fault is it? But let us get back to my question. How and on what will you live?"

"I am not so romantic as you are pleased to say, sir. I must confess that, as regards the future, I have counted upon your kindness. You are so rich, that five hundred thousand francs would not materially affect your fortune; and, on the interest of that sum, I could live quietly, if not happily."

"And suppose I refuse you this money?"

"I know you well enough, sir, to feel sure that you will not do so. You are too just to wish that I alone should expiate wrongs that are not of my making. Left to myself, I should at my present age have achieved a position. It is late for me to try and make one now; but I will do my best."

"Superb!" interrupted the comte; "you are really superb! One never heard of such a hero of romance. What a character! But tell me, what do you expect from all this astonishing disinterestedness?"—"Nothing, sir."

The comte shrugged his shoulders, looked sarcastically at his son, and observed: "The compensation is very slight. And you expect me to believe all this! No, sir, mankind is not in the habit of indulging in such fine actions for its pleasure alone. You must have some reason for acting so grandly; some reason which I fail to see."—"None but what I have already told you."

"Therefore it is understood you intend to relinquish everything; you will even abandon your proposed union with Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange? You forget that for two years I have in vain constantly expressed my disappointment of this marriage."

"No, sir. I have seen Mademoiselle Claire; I have explained

my unhappy position to her. Whatever happens, she has sworn to be my wife."

"And do you think that Madame d'Arlange will give her granddaughter to M. Gerdy?"

"We hope so, sir. The marquise is sufficiently infected with aristocratic ideas to prefer a nobleman's bastard to the son of some honest tradesman; but should she refuse, we would await her death, though without desiring it." The calm manner in which Albert said this enraged the comte. "Can this be my son?" he cried. "Never! What blood have you then in your veins, sir? Your worthy mother alone might tell us, provided, however, she herself knows."

"Sir," cried Albert menacingly, "think well before you speak! She is my mother, and that is sufficient. I am her son, not her judge. No one shall insult her in my presence, I will not permit it, sir; and I will suffer it least of all from you."

The comte made great efforts to keep his anger within bounds; but Albert's behavior thoroughly enraged him. What, his son rebelled, he dared to brave him to his face, he threatened him! The old fellow jumped from his chair, and moved toward the young man as if he would strike him. "Leave the room," he cried, in a voice choking with rage, "leave the room instantly! Retire to your apartments, and take care not to leave them without my orders. To-morrow I will let you know my decision." Albert bowed respectfully, but without lowering his eyes, and walked slowly to the door. He had already opened it, when M. de Commarin experienced one of those revulsions of feeling so frequent in violent natures. "Albert," said he, "come here and listen to me." The young man turned back, much affected by this change. "Do not go," continued the comte, "until I have told you what I think. You are worthy of being the heir of a great house, sir. I may be angry with you; but I can never lose my esteem for you. You are a noble man, Albert. Give me your hand."

It was a happy moment for these two men, and such a one as they had scarcely ever experienced in their lives, restrained as they had been by cold etiquette. The comte felt proud of his son, and recognized in him himself at that age. For a long time their hands remained clasped, without either being able to utter a word. At last, M. de Commarin resumed his seat. "I must ask you to leave me, Albert," he said kindly. "I must be alone to reflect, to try and accustom myself to this terrible

blow." And, as the young man closed the door, he added, as if giving vent to his inmost thoughts: "If he, in whom I have placed all my hope, deserts me, what will become of me? And what will the other one be like?"

On leaving M. de Commarin, and while slowly mounting the stairs which led to his apartments, Albert's thoughts reverted to Claire. What was she doing at that moment? Thinking of him no doubt. She knew that the crisis would come that very evening, or the next day at the latest. She was probably praying. Albert was thoroughly exhausted; his head felt dizzy, and seemed ready to burst. He rang for his servant, and ordered some tea. "You do wrong in not sending for the doctor, sir," said Lubin, his valet. "I ought to disobey you, and send for him myself."—"It would be useless," replied Albert sadly; "he could do nothing for me." As the valet was leaving the room, he added: "Say nothing about my being unwell to any one, Lubin; it is nothing at all. If I should feel worse, I will ring."

At that moment, to see any one, to hear a voice, to have to reply, was more than he could bear. He longed to be left entirely to himself. After the painful emotions arising from his explanations with the comte, he could not sleep. He opened one of the library windows, and looked out. It was a beautiful night: and there was a lovely moon. Seen at this hour, by the mild, tremulous evening light, the gardens attached to the mansion seemed twice their usual size. The moving tops of the great trees stretched away like an immense plain, hiding the neighboring houses; the flower-beds, set off by the green shrubs, looked like great black patches, while particles of shell, tiny pieces of glass, and shining pebbles sparkled in the carefully kept walks. The horses stamped in the stable; and the rattling of their halter chains against the bars of the manger could be distinctly heard. In the coach-house the men were putting away for the night the carriage, always kept ready throughout the evening, in case the comte should wish to go out. Albert was reminded by these surroundings of the magnificence of his past life. He sighed deeply. "Must I, then, lose all this?" he murmured. "I can scarcely, even for myself, abandon so much splendor without regret; and thinking of Claire makes it hard indeed. Have I not dreamed of a life of exceptional happiness for her, a result almost impossible to realize without wealth?" Midnight sounded from the neighboring church of



St. Clotilde, and as the night was chilly, he closed the window, and sat down near the fire, which he stirred. In the hope of obtaining a respite from his thoughts, he took up the evening paper, in which was an account of the assassination at La Jonchere; but he found it impossible to read: the lines danced before his eyes. Then he thought of writing to Claire. He sat down at his desk, and wrote: "My dearly loved Claire," but he could go no further; his distracted brain could not furnish him with a single sentence. At last, at break of day, he threw himself on to a sofa, and fell into a heavy sleep.

At half-past nine in the morning, he was suddenly awakened by the noise of the door being hastily opened. A servant entered, with a scared look on his face, and so out of breath from having come up the stairs four at a time that he could scarcely speak. "Sir," said he, "vicomte, be quick, fly and hide, save yourself, they are here, it is the—"

A commissary of police, wearing his sash, appeared at the door. He was followed by a number of men, among whom M. Tabaret could be seen, keeping as much out of sight as possible. The commissary approached Albert. "You are," he asked, "Guy Louis Marie Albert de Rheteau de Commarin?"—"Yes, sir."—The commissary placed his hand upon him while pronouncing the usual formula: "M. de Commarin, in the name of the law, I arrest you."

"Me, sir? me?" Albert, aroused suddenly from his painful dreams, seemed hardly to comprehend what was taking place. He seemed to ask himself: "Am I really awake? Is not this some hideous nightmare?" He threw a stupid, astonished look upon the commissary of police, his men, and M. Tabaret, who had not taken his eyes off him.

"Here is the warrant," added the commissary, unfolding the paper. Mechanically Albert glanced over it. "Claudine assassinated!" he cried. Then very low, but distinct enough to be heard by the commissary, by one of his officers, and by old Tabaret, he added: "I am lost!"

While the commissary was making inquiries, which immediately follow all arrests, the police officers spread through the apartments, and proceeded to a searching examination of them. They had received orders to obey M. Tabaret, and the old fellow guided them in their search, made them ransack drawers and closets, and move the furniture to look underneath or behind. They seized a number of articles belonging to the vicomte

—documents, manuscripts, and a very voluminous correspondence; but it was with especial delight that M. Tabaret put his hands on certain articles, which were carefully described in their proper order in the official report: 1. In the anteroom, hung with all sorts of weapons, a broken foil was found behind a sofa. This foil has a peculiar handle, and is unlike those commonly sold. It is ornamented with the comte's coronet, and the initials A. C. It has been broken at about the middle; and the end can not be found. When questioned, the vicomte declared that he did not know what had become of the missing end. 2. In the dressing-room, a pair of black cloth trousers was discovered, still damp, and bearing stains of mud or rather of mold. All one side is smeared with greenish moss, like that which grows on walls. On the front are numerous rents; and one near the knee is about four inches long. These trousers had not been hung up with the other clothes; but appear to have been hidden between two large trunks full of clothing. 3. In the pocket of the above-mentioned trousers was found a pair of lavender kid gloves. The palm of the right-hand glove bears a large greenish stain, produced by grass or moss. The tips of the fingers have been worn as if by rubbing. Upon the backs of both gloves are some scratches, apparently made by finger-nails. 4. There were also found in the dressing-room two pairs of boots, one of which, though clean and polished, was still very damp; and an umbrella recently wetted, the end of which was still covered with a light colored mud. 5. In a large room, called the library, were found a box of cigars of the trabucos brand, and on the mantelshelf a number of cigar-holders in amber and meerschaum.

The last article noted down, M. Tabaret approached the commissary of police. "I have everything I could desire," he whispered.—"And I have finished," replied the commissary. "Our prisoner does not appear to know exactly how to act. You heard what he said. He gave in at once. I suppose you will call it lack of experience."

"In the middle of the day," replied the amateur detective in a whisper, "he would not have been quite so crestfallen. But early in the morning, suddenly awakened, you know— Always arrest a person early in the morning, when he's hungry and only half awake."

"I have questioned some of the servants. Their evidence is rather peculiar."

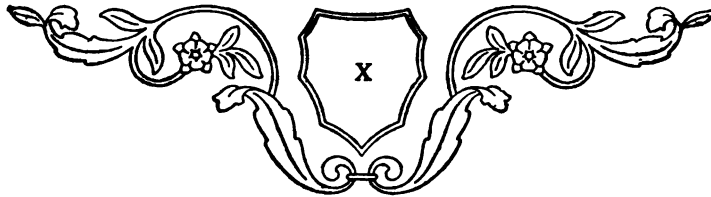
"Very well; we shall see. But I must hurry off and find the investigating magistrate, who is impatiently expecting me."

Albert was beginning to recover a little from the stupor into which he had been plunged by the entrance of the commissary of police. "Sir," he asked, "will you permit me to say a few words in your presence to the Comte de Commarin? I am the victim of some mistake, which will be very soon discovered—"

"It's always a mistake," muttered old Tabaret.

"What you ask is impossible," replied the commissary. "I have special orders of the strictest sort. You must not henceforth communicate with a living soul. A cab is in waiting below. Have the goodness to accompany me to it."

In crossing the vestibule, Albert noticed a great stir among the servants; they all seemed to have lost their senses. M. Denis gave some orders in a sharp, imperative tone. Then he thought he heard that the Comte de Commarin had been struck down with apoplexy. After that, he remembered nothing. They almost carried him to the cab, which drove off as fast as the two little horses could go. M. Tabaret had just hastened away in a more rapid vehicle.



**M.** DABURON had arrived at his office in the Palais de Justice at nine o'clock in the morning, and was waiting. His course resolved upon, he had not lost an instant, understanding as well as old Tabaret the necessity for rapid action. He had already had an interview with the public prosecutor, and had arranged everything with the police. Besides issuing the warrant against Albert, he had summoned the Comte de Commarin, Madame Gerdy, Noel, and some of Albert's servants to appear before him with as little delay as possible. He thought it essential to question all these persons before examining the prisoner. Several detectives had started off to execute his orders, and he himself sat in his office, like a general commanding an army, who sends off his aide-de-camp to begin the battle, and who hopes that victory will crown his com-

binations. Often, at this same hour, he had sat in this office, under circumstances almost identical. A crime had been committed, and, believing he had discovered the criminal, he had given orders for his arrest. Was not that his duty? But he had never before experienced the anxiety of mind which disturbed him now. Many a time had he issued warrants of arrest, without possessing even half the proofs which guided him in the present case. He kept repeating this to himself; and yet he could not quiet his dreadful anxiety, which would not allow him a moment's rest.

He wondered why his people were so long in making their appearance. He walked up and down the room, counting the minutes, drawing out his watch three times within a quarter of an hour, to compare it with the clock. Every time he heard a step in the passage, almost deserted at that hour, he moved near the door, stopped and listened. At length some one knocked. It was his clerk, whom he had sent for. There was nothing particular in this man; he was tall rather than big, and very slim. His gait was precise, his gestures were methodical, and his face was as impassive as if it had been cut out of a piece of yellow wood. He was thirty-four years of age, and during thirteen years had acted as clerk to four investigating magistrates in succession. He could hear the most astonishing things without moving a muscle. His name was Constant. He bowed to the magistrate, and excused himself for his tardiness. He had been busy with some bookkeeping, which he did every morning; and his wife had had to send after him. "You are still in good time," said M. Daburon: "but we shall soon have plenty of work: so you had better get your paper ready." Five minutes later, the usher introduced M. Noel Gerdy. He entered with an easy manner, like a barrister who was well acquainted with the Palais, and who knew its winding ways. He in no wise resembled, this morning, old Tabaret's friend; still less could he have been recognized as Madame Juliette's lover. He was entirely another being, or rather he had resumed his every-day bearing. From his firm step, his placid face, one would never imagine that, after an evening of emotion and excitement, after a secret visit to his mistress, he had passed the night by the pillow of a dying woman, and that woman his mother, or at least one who had filled his mother's place. What a contrast between him and the magistrate! M. Daburon had not slept either: but one could easily see that in

his feebleness, in his anxious look, in the dark circles about his eyes. His shirt-front was all rumpled, and his cuffs were far from clean. Carried away by the course of events, the mind had forgotten the body. Noel's well-shaved chin, on the contrary, rested upon an irreproachably white cravat; his collar did not show a crease; his hair and his whiskers had been most carefully brushed. He bowed to M. Daburon, and held out the summons he had received. "You summoned me, sir," he said; "and I am here awaiting your orders."

The investigating magistrate had met the young barrister several times in the lobbies of the Palais; and he knew him well by sight. He remembered having heard M. Gerdy spoken of as a man of talent and promise, whose reputation was fast rising. He therefore welcomed him as a fellow workman, and invited him to be seated. The preliminaries common in the examinations of all witnesses ended; the name, surname, age, place of business, and so on, having been written down, the magistrate, who had followed his clerk with his eyes while he was writing, turned toward Noel. "I presume you know, M. Gerdy," he began, "the matters in connection with which you are troubled with appearing before me?"

"Yes, sir, the murder of that poor old woman at La Jonchere."

"Precisely," replied M. Daburon. Then, calling to mind his promise to old Tabaret, he added: "If justice has summoned you so promptly, it is because we have found your name often mentioned in Widow Lerouge's papers."

"I am not surprised at that," replied the barrister: "we were greatly interested in that poor woman, who was my nurse; and I know that Madame Gerdy wrote to her frequently."

"Very well; then you will give me some information about her."

"I fear, sir, that it will be very incomplete. I knew very little about this poor old Madame Lerouge. I was taken from her at a very early age; and, since I have been a man, I have thought but little about her, except to send her occasionally a little aid."

"You never went to visit her?"

"Excuse me. I have gone there to see her many times; but I remained only a few minutes. Madame Gerdy, who has often seen her, and to whom she talked of all her affairs, could have enlightened you much better than I."

"But," said the magistrate, "I expect shortly to see Madame Gerdy here; she, too, must have received a summons."

"I know it, sir, but it is impossible for her to appear: she is ill in bed."—"Seriously?"—"So seriously that you will be obliged, I think, to give up all hope of her testimony. She is attacked with a disease which, in the words of my friend, Dr. Herve, never forgives. It is something like inflammation of the brain, if I am not mistaken. It may be that her life will be saved, but she will never recover her reason. If she does not die, she will be insane." M. Daburon appeared greatly vexed. "This is very annoying," he muttered. "And you think, my dear sir, that it will be impossible to obtain any information from her?"

"It is useless even to hope for it. She has completely lost her reason. She was, when I left her, in such a state of utter prostration that I fear she can not live through the day."—"And when was she attacked by this illness?"—"Yesterday evening."—"Suddenly?"—"Yes, sir; at least, apparently so, though I myself think she has been unwell for the last three weeks at least. Yesterday, however, on rising from dinner, after having eaten but little, she took up a newspaper; and, by a most unfortunate hazard, her eyes fell exactly upon the lines which gave an account of this crime. She at once uttered a loud cry, fell back in her chair, and thence slipped to the floor, murmuring: 'Oh, the unhappy man, the unhappy man!'"

"The unhappy woman, you mean."

"No, sir. She uttered the words I have just repeated. Evidently the exclamation did not refer to my poor nurse."

Upon this reply, so important and yet made in the most unconscious tone, M. Daburon raised his eyes to the witness. The barrister lowered his head. "And then?" asked the magistrate, after a moment's silence, during which he had taken a few notes.

"Those words, sir, were the last spoken by Madame Gerdy. Assisted by our servant, I carried her to her bed. The doctor was sent for; and since then she has not recovered consciousness. The doctor—"

"It is well," interrupted M. Daburon. "Let us leave that for the present. Do you know, sir, whether Widow Lerouge had any enemies?"—"None that I know of, sir."—"She had no enemies? Well, now tell me, does there exist to your knowledge any one having the least interest in the death of this poor

woman?" As he asked this question the investigating magistrate kept his eyes fixed on Noel's, not wishing him to turn or lower his head. The barrister started, and seemed deeply moved. He was disconcerted; he hesitated, as if a struggle was going on within him. Finally, in a voice which was by no means firm, he replied: "No, no one."

"Is that really true?" asked the magistrate, looking at him more searchingly. "You know no one whom this crime benefits, or whom it might benefit—absolutely no one?"

"I know only one thing, sir," replied Noel; "and that is, that, as far as I am concerned, it has caused me an irreparable injury."

"At last," thought M. Daburon, "we have got at the letters; and I have not betrayed poor old Tabaret. It would be too bad to cause the least trouble to that zealous and invaluable man." He then added aloud: "An injury to you, my dear sir? You will, I hope, explain yourself."

Noel's embarrassment, of which he had already given some signs, reappeared much more marked. "I am aware, sir," he replied, "that I owe justice not merely the truth, but the whole truth; but there are circumstances involved so delicate that the conscience of a man of honor sees danger in them. Besides, it is very hard to be obliged to unveil such sad secrets, the revelation of which may sometimes—" M. Daburon interrupted with a gesture. Noel's sad tone impressed him. Knowing, beforehand, what he was about to hear, he felt for the young barrister. He turned to his clerk. "Constant!" said he in a peculiar tone. This was evidently a signal; for the tall clerk rose methodically, put his pen behind his ear, and went out in his measured tread.

Noel appeared sensible of this kindness. His face expressed the strongest gratitude; his look returned thanks. "I am very much obliged to you, sir," he said with suppressed warmth, "for your considerateness. What I have to say is very painful; but it will be scarcely an effort to speak before you now."

"Fear nothing," replied the magistrate; "I will only retain of your deposition, my dear sir, what seems to me absolutely indispensable."

"I feel scarcely master of myself, sir," began Noel; "so pray pardon my emotion. If any words escape me that seem charged with bitterness, excuse them; they will be involuntary. Up to the past few days, I always believed that I was the offspring of

illicit love. My history is short. I have been honorably ambitious; I have worked hard. He who has no name must make one, you know. I have passed a quiet life, retired and austere, as people must, who, starting at the foot of the ladder, wish to reach the top. I worshiped her whom I believed to be my mother; and I felt convinced that she loved me in return. The stain of my birth had some humiliations attached to it; but I despised them. Comparing my lot with that of so many others, I felt that I had more than common advantages. One day, Providence placed in my hands all the letters which my father, the Comte de Commarin, had written to Madame Gerdy during the time she was his mistress. On reading these letters, I was convinced that I was not what I had hitherto believed myself to be—that Madame Gerdy was not my mother!” And, without giving M. Daburon time to reply, he laid before him the facts which, twelve hours before, he had related to M. Tabaret. It was the same story, with the same circumstances, the same abundance of precise and conclusive details; but the tone in which it was told was entirely changed. When speaking to the old detective, the young barrister had been emphatic and violent; but now, in the presence of the investigating magistrate, he restrained his vehement emotions. One might imagine that he adapted his style to his auditors, wishing to produce the same effect on both, and using the method which would best accomplish his purpose. To an ordinary mind like M. Tabaret’s he used the exaggeration of anger; but to a man of superior intelligence like M. Daburon, he employed the exaggeration of restraint. With the detective he had rebelled against his unjust lot; but with the magistrate he seemed to bow, full of resignation, before a blind fatality. With genuine eloquence and rare facility of expression, he related his feelings on the day following the discovery—his grief, his perplexity, his doubts. To support this moral certainty, some positive testimony was needed. Could he hope for this from the comte or from Madame Gerdy, both interested in concealing the truth? No. But he had counted upon that of his nurse—the poor old woman who loved him, and who, near the close of her life, would be glad to free her conscience from this heavy load. She was dead now; and the letters became mere waste paper in his hands. Then he passed on to his explanation with Madame Gerdy, and he gave the magistrate even fuller details than he had given his old neighbor. She had, he said, at first utterly



denied the substitution, but he insinuated that, plied with questions, and overcome by the evidence, she had, in a moment of despair, confessed all, declaring, soon after, that she would retract and deny this confession, being resolved at all hazards that her son should preserve his position. From this scene, in the barrister's judgment, might be dated the first attacks of the illness to which she was now succumbing. Noel then described his interview with the Vicomte de Commarin. A few inaccuracies occurred in his narrative, but so slight that it would have been difficult to charge him with them. Besides, there was nothing in them at all unfavorable to Albert. He insisted, on the contrary, upon the excellent impression which that young man had made on him. Albert had received the revelation with a certain distrust, it is true, but with a noble firmness at the same time, and, like a brave heart, was ready to bow before the justification of right. In fact, he drew an almost enthusiastic portrait of this rival, who had not been spoiled by prosperity, who had left him without a look of hatred, toward whom he felt himself drawn, and who after all was his brother.

M. Daburon listened to Noel with a most unrelenting attention, without allowing a word, a movement, or a frown, to betray his feelings. "How, sir," observed the magistrate when the young man ceased speaking, "could you have told me that, in your opinion, no one was interested in Widow Lerouge's death?" The barrister made no reply. "It seems to me," continued M. Daburon, "that the Vicomte de Commarin's position has thereby become almost impregnable. Madame Gerdy is insane; the comte will deny all; your letters prove nothing. It is evident that the crime is of the greatest service to this young man, and that it was committed at a singularly favorable moment."

"Oh, sir!" cried Noel, protesting with all his energy, "this insinuation is dreadful." The magistrate watched the barrister's face narrowly. Was he speaking frankly, or was he but playing at being generous? Could it really be that he had never had any suspicion of this? Noel did not flinch under the gaze, but almost immediately continued: "What reason could this young man have for trembling, or fearing for his position? I did not utter one threatening word, even indirectly. I did not present myself like a man who, furious at being robbed, demands that everything which had been taken from him should be restored on the spot. I merely presented the

facts to Albert, saying: 'Here is the truth; what do you think we ought to do? Be judge.'

"And he asked you for time?"

"Yes. I had suggested his accompanying me to see Widow Lerouge, whose testimony might dispel all doubts; he did not seem to understand me. But he was well acquainted with her, having visited her with the comte, who supplied her, I have since learned, liberally with money."

"Did not this generosity appear to you very singular?"—

"No."—"Can you explain why the vicomte did not appear disposed to accompany you?"—"Certainly. He had just said that he wished, before all, to have an explanation with his father, who was then absent, but who would return in a few days."

The truth, as all the world knows, and delights in proclaiming, has an accent which no one can mistake. M. Daburon had not the slightest doubt of his witness's good faith. Noel continued with the ingenuous candor of an honest heart which suspicion has never touched with its bat's wing: "The idea of treating at once with my father pleased me exceedingly. I thought it so much better to wash all one's dirty linen at home, I had never desired anything but an amicable arrangement. With my hands full of proofs, I should still recoil from a public trial."

"Would you not have brought an action?"

"Never, sir, not at any price. Could I," he added proudly, "to regain my rightful name begin by dishonoring it?" This time M. Daburon could not conceal his sincere admiration. "A most praiseworthy feeling, sir," he said.

"I think," replied Noel, "that it is but natural. If things came to the worst, I had determined to leave my title with Albert. No doubt the name of Commarin is an illustrious one, but I hope that, in ten years' time, mine will be more known. I would, however, have demanded a large pecuniary compensation. I possess nothing; and I have often been hampered in my career by the want of money. That which Madame Gerdy owed to the generosity of my father was almost entirely spent. My education had absorbed a great part of it; and it was long before my profession covered my expenses. Madame Gerdy and I live very quietly; but, unfortunately, though simple in her tastes, she lacks economy and system; and no one can imagine how great our expenses have been. But I have nothing to reproach myself with, whatever happens.

'At the commencement I could not keep my anger well under control; but now I bear no ill-will. On learning of the death of my nurse, though, I cast all my hopes into the sea.'

"You were wrong, my dear sir," said the magistrate. "I advise you to still hope. Perhaps, before the end of the day, you will enter into possession of your rights. Justice, I will not conceal from you, thinks she has found Widow Lerouge's assassin. At this moment Vicomte Albert is doubtless under arrest."

"What!" exclaimed Noel, with a sort of stupor: "I was not, then, mistaken, sir, in the meaning of your words. I dreaded to understand them."

"You have not mistaken me, sir," said M. Daburon. "I thank you for your sincere straightforward explanations; they have eased my task materially. To-morrow—for to-day my time is all taken up—we will write down your deposition together if you like. I have nothing more to say, I believe, except to ask you for the letters in your possession, and which are indispensable to me."

"Within an hour, sir, you shall have them," replied Noel. And he retired after having warmly expressed his gratitude to the investigating magistrate.

Had he been less preoccupied, the barrister might have perceived at the end of the gallery old Tabaret, who had just arrived, eager and happy, like a bearer of great news as he was. His cab had scarcely stopped at the gate of the Palais de Justice before he was in the courtyard and rushing toward the porch. To see him jumping more nimbly than a fifth-rate lawyer's clerk up the steep flight of stairs leading to the magistrate's office, one would never have believed that he was many years on the shady side of fifty. Even he himself had forgotten it. He did not remember how he had passed the night; he had never before felt so fresh, so agile, in such spirits; he seemed to have springs of steel in his limbs. He burst like a cannon-shot into the magistrate's office, knocking up against the methodical clerk in the rudest of ways, without even asking his pardon. "Caught!" he cried while yet on the threshold, "caught, nipped, squeezed, strung, trapped, locked! We have got the man." Old Tabaret, more Tiraucclair than ever, gesticulated with such comical vehemence and such remarkable contortions that even the tall clerk smiled, for which, however, he took himself severely to task on going to bed that night.

But M. Daburon, still under the influence of Noel's deposition, was shocked at this apparently unreasonable joy; although he felt the safer for it. He looked severely at old Tabaret, saying: "Hush, sir; be decent, compose yourself." At any other time the old fellow would have felt ashamed at having deserved such a reprimand. Now it made no impression on him. "I can't be quiet," he replied. "Never has anything like this been known before. All that I mentioned has been found. Broken foil, lavender kid gloves slightly frayed, cigar-holder; nothing is wanting. You shall have them, sir, and many other things besides. I have a little system of my own, which appears by no means a bad one. Just see the triumph of my method of induction, which Gevrol ridiculed so much. I'd give a hundred francs if he were only here now. But no; my Gevrol wants to nab the man with the earrings; he is just capable of doing that. He is a fine fellow, this Gevrol, a famous fellow! How much do you give him a year for his skill?"

"Come, my dear M. Tabaret," said the magistrate as soon as he could get in a word, "be serious, if you can, and let us proceed in order."

"Pooh!" replied the old fellow, "what good will that do? It is a clear case now. When they bring the fellow before you, merely show him the particles of kid taken from behind the nails of the victim, side by side with his torn gloves, and you will overwhelm him. I wager that he will confess all, *hic et nunc*—yes, I wager my head against his; although that's pretty risky; for he may get off yet! Those milk-sops on the jury are just capable of according him extenuating circumstances. Ah! all those delays are fatal to justice! Why, if all the world were of my mind, the punishment of rascals wouldn't take such a time! They should be hanged as soon as caught. That's my opinion." M. Daburon resigned himself to this shower of words. As soon as the old fellow's excitement had cooled down a little, he began questioning him. He even then had great trouble in obtaining the exact details of the arrest; details which later on were confirmed by the commissary's official report. The magistrate appeared very surprised when he heard that Albert had exclaimed, "I am lost!" at sight of the warrant. "That," muttered he, "is a terrible proof against him."

"I should think so," replied old Tabaret. "In his ordinary state he would never have allowed himself to utter such words, for they in fact destroy him. We arrested him when he was

scarcely awake. He hadn't been in bed, but was lying in a troubled sleep, upon a sofa, when we arrived. I took good care to let a frightened servant run in in advance, and to follow closely upon him myself, to see the effect. All my arrangements were made. But, never fear, he will find a plausible excuse for this fatal exclamation. By the way, I should add that we found on the floor, near by, a crumpled copy of last evening's 'Gazette de France,' which contained an account of the assassination. This is the first time that a piece of news in the papers ever helped to nab a criminal."

"Yes," murmured the magistrate, deep in thought, "yes, you are a valuable man, M. Tabaret." Then, louder, he added: "I am thoroughly convinced, for M. Gerdy has just this moment left me."

"You have seen Noel!" cried the old fellow. On the instant all his proud self-satisfaction disappeared. A cloud of anxiety spread itself like a veil over his beaming countenance. "Noel here," he repeated. Then he timidly added: "And does he know?"—"Nothing," replied M. Daburon. "I had no need of mentioning your name. Besides, had I not promised absolute secrecy?"

"Ah, that's all right," cried old Tabaret. "And what do you think, sir, of Noel?"

"He is, I am sure, a noble, worthy heart," said the magistrate; "a nature both strong and tender. The sentiments which I heard him express here, and the genuineness of which it is impossible to doubt, manifested an elevation of soul, unhappily, very rare. Seldom in my life have I met with a man who so won my sympathy from the first. I can well understand one's pride in being among his friends."

"Just what I said; he has precisely the same effect upon every one. I love him as though he were my own child; and, whatever happens, he will inherit almost the whole of my fortune: yes, I intend leaving him everything. My will is made, and is in the hands of M. Baron, my notary. There is a small legacy, too, for Madame Gerdy; but I am going to have the paragraph that relates to that taken out at once."

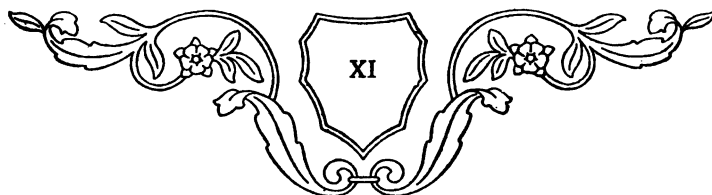
"Madame Gerdy, M. Tabaret, will soon be beyond all need of worldly goods."—"How, what do you mean? Has the comte—"

"She is dying, and is not likely to live through the day; M. Gerdy told me so himself."

"Ah! heavens!" cried the old fellow, "what is that you say? Dying? Noel will be distracted; but no; since she is not his mother, how can it affect him? Dying! I thought so much of her before this discovery. Poor humanity! It seems as though all the accomplices are passing away at the same time; for I forgot to tell you, that, just as I was leaving the Commarin mansion, I heard a servant tell another that the comte had fallen down in a fit on learning the news of his son's arrest."

"That will be a great misfortune for M. Gerdy."—"For Noel?"—"I had counted upon M. de Commarin's testimony to recover for him all that he so well deserves. The comte dead, Widow Lerouge dead, Madame Gerdy dying, or in any event insane, who then can tell us whether the substitution alluded to in the letters was ever carried into execution?"

"True," murmured old Tabaret; "it is true! And I did not think of it. What fatality! For I am not deceived; I am certain that—" He did not finish. The door of M. Daburon's office opened, and the Comte de Commarin himself appeared on the threshold, as rigid as one of those old portraits which look as though they were frozen in their gilded frames. The nobleman motioned with his hand, and the two servants who had helped him up as far as the door, retired.



**I**T was indeed the Comte de Commarin, though more like his shadow. His head, usually carried so high, leaned upon his chest; his figure was bent; his eyes had no longer their accustomed fire; his hands trembled. The extreme disorder of his dress rendered more striking still the change which had come over him. In one night he had grown twenty years older. This man, yesterday so proud of never having bent to a storm, was now completely shattered. The pride of his name had constituted his entire strength; that humbled, he seemed utterly overwhelmed. Everything in him gave way at once; all his supports failed him at the same time. His cold, lifeless gaze revealed the dull stupor of his thoughts. He presented such

a picture of utter despair that the investigating magistrate slightly shuddered at the sight. M. Tabaret looked frightened, and even the clerk seemed moved.

"Constant," said M. Daburon quickly, "go with M. Tabaret, and see if there's any news at the Prefecture."

The clerk left the room, followed by the detective, who went away regretfully. The comte had not noticed their presence; he paid no attention to their departure. M. Daburon offered him a seat, which he accepted with a sad smile. "I feel so weak," said he; "you must excuse my sitting."

Apologies to an investigating magistrate! What an advance in civilization, when the nobles consider themselves subject to the law, and bow to its decrees! Every one respects justice nowadays, and fears it a little, even when only represented by a simple and conscientious investigating magistrate.

"You are, perhaps, too unwell, comte," said the magistrate, "to give me the explanations I had hoped for."

"I am better, thank you," replied M. de Commarin; "I am as well as could be expected after the shock I have received. When I heard of the crime of which my son is accused, and of his arrest, I was thunderstruck. I believed myself a strong man; but I rolled in the dust. My servants thought me dead. Why was it not so? The strength of my constitution, my physician tells me, was all that saved me; but I believe that heaven wishes me to live, that I may drink to the bitter dregs my cup of humiliation." He stopped suddenly, nearly choked by a flow of blood that rose to his mouth. The investigating magistrate remained standing near the table, almost afraid to move. After a few moments' rest, the comte found relief, and continued: "Unhappy man that I am! ought I not to have expected it? Everything comes to light sooner or later. I am punished for my great sin—pride. I thought myself out of reach of the thunderbolt; and I have been the means of drawing down the storm upon my house. Albert an assassin! A Vicomte de Commarin arraigned before a court of assize! Ah, sir, punish me also, for I alone and long ago laid the foundation of this crime. Fifteen centuries of spotless fame end with me in infamy."

M. Daburon considered Comte de Commarin's conduct unpardonable, and had determined not to spare him. He had expected to meet a proud, haughty noble, almost unmanageable; and he had resolved to humble his arrogance. Perhaps the

harsh treatment he had received of old from the Marquise d'Arlange had given him, unconsciously, a slight grudge against the aristocracy. He had vaguely thought of certain rather severe remarks, which were to overcome the old nobleman, and bring him to a sense of his position. But when he found himself in the presence of such a sincere repentance, his indignation changed to profound pity; and he began to wonder how he could assuage the comte's grief.

"Write, sir," continued M. de Commarin with an exaltation of which he did not seem capable ten minutes before—"write my avowal and suppress nothing. I have no longer need of mercy nor of tenderness. What have I to fear now? Is not my disgrace public? Must not I, Comte Rheteau de Commarin, appear before the tribunal, to proclaim the infamy of our house? Ah! all is lost now, even honor itself. Write, sir; for I wish that all the world shall know that I am the most deserving of blame. But they shall also know that the punishment has been already terrible, and that there was no need for this last and awful trial." The comte stopped for a moment, to concentrate and arrange his memory. He soon continued in a firmer voice, and adapting his tone to what he had to say: "When I was of Albert's age, sir, my parents made me marry, in spite of my protestations, the noblest and purest of young girls. I made her the most unhappy of women. I could not love her. I cherished a most passionate love for a mistress, who had trusted herself to me, and whom I had loved for a long time. I found her rich in beauty, purity, and mind. Her name was Valerie. My heart is, so to say, dead and cold in me, sir; but, ah! when I pronounce that name it still has a great effect upon me. In spite of my marriage, I could not induce myself to part from her, though she wished me to. The idea of sharing my love with another was revolting to her. No doubt she loved me then. Our relations continued. My wife and my mistress became mothers at nearly the same time. This coincidence suggested to me the fatal idea of sacrificing my legitimate son to his less fortunate brother. I communicated this project to Valerie. To my great surprise, she refused it with horror. Already the maternal instinct was aroused within her; she would not be separated from her child. I have preserved, as a monument of my folly, the letters which she wrote to me at that time. I reread them only last night. Ah! why did I not listen to both her arguments and her prayers? It was



because I was mad. She had a sort of presentiment of the evil which overwhelms me to-day. But I came to Paris; I had absolute control over her. I threatened to leave her, never to see her again. She yielded; and my valet and Claudine Lerouge were charged with this wicked substitution. It is, therefore, the son of my mistress who bears the title of Vicomte de Commarin, and who was arrested but a short time ago."

M. Daburon had not hoped for a declaration so clear, and above all so prompt. He secretly rejoiced for the young barrister, whose noble sentiments had quite captivated him. "So, comte," said he, "you acknowledge that M. Noel Gerdy is the issue of your legitimate marriage, and that he alone is entitled to bear your name?"

"Yes, sir. Alas! I was then more delighted at the success of my project than I should have been over the most brilliant victory. I was so intoxicated with the joy of having my Valerie's child there, near me, that I forgot everything else. I had transferred to him a part of my love for his mother; or, rather, I loved him still more, if that be possible. The thought that he would bear my name, that he would inherit all my wealth, to the detriment of the other, transported me with delight. The other I hated; I could not even look upon him. I do not recollect having kissed him twice. On this point Valerie, who was very good, reproached me severely. One thing alone interfered with my happiness. The Comtesse de Commarin adored him whom she believed to be her son, and always wished to have him on her knees. I can not express what I suffered at seeing my wife cover with kisses and caresses the child of my mistress. But I kept him from her as much as I could; and she, poor woman! not understanding what was passing within me, imagined that I was doing everything to prevent her son loving her. She died, sir, with this idea, which poisoned her last days. She died of sorrow; but saint-like, without a complaint, without a murmur, pardon upon her lips and in her heart."

Though greatly pressed for time, M. Daburon did not venture to interrupt the comte, to ask him briefly for the immediate facts of the case. He knew that fever alone gave him this unnatural energy, to which at any moment might succeed the most complete prostration. He feared, if he stopped him for an instant, that he would not have strength enough to resume.

"I did not shed a single tear," continued the comte. "What

had she been in my life? A cause of sorrow and remorse. But God's justice, in advance of man's, was about to take a terrible revenge. One day I was warned that Valerie was deceiving me, and had done so for a long time. I could not believe it at first; it seemed to me impossible, absurd. I would have sooner doubted myself than her. I had taken her from a garret, where she was working sixteen hours a day to earn a few sous; she owed all to me. I had made her so much a part of myself that I could not credit her being false. I could not induce myself to feel jealous. However, I inquired into the matter; I had her watched; I even acted the spy upon her myself. I had been told the truth. This unhappy woman had another lover, and had had him for more than ten years. He was a cavalry officer. In coming to her house he took every precaution. He usually left about midnight; but sometimes he came to pass the night, and in that case went away in the early morning. Being stationed near Paris, he frequently obtained leave of absence and came to visit her; and he would remain shut up in her apartments until his time expired. One evening my spies brought me word that he was there. I hastened to the house. My presence did not embarrass her. She received me as usual, throwing her arms about my neck. I thought that my spies had deceived me; and I was going to tell her all when I saw upon the piano a buckskin glove, such as are worn by soldiers. Not wishing a scene, and not knowing to what excess my anger might carry me, I rushed out of the place without saying a word. I have never seen her since. She wrote to me. I did not open her letters. She attempted to force her way into my presence, but in vain; my servants had orders that they dared not ignore."

Could this be the Comte de Commarin, celebrated for his haughty coldness, for his reserve so full of disdain, who spoke thus, who opened his whole life without restrictions, without reserve? And to whom? To a stranger. But he was in one of those desperate states, allied to madness, when all reflection leaves us, when we must find some outlet to a too powerful emotion. What mattered to him this secret, so courageously borne for so many years? He disburdened himself of it, like the poor man, who, weighed down by a too heavy burden, casts it to the earth without caring where it falls, nor how much it may tempt the cupidity of the passers-by.

"Nothing," continued he, "no, nothing, can approach to what

I then endured. My very heartstrings were bound up in that woman. She was like a part of myself. In separating from her, it seemed to me that I was tearing away a part of my own flesh. I can not describe the furious passions her memory stirred within me. I scorned her and longed for her with equal vehemence. I hated her and I loved her. And to this day her detestable image has been ever present to my imagination. Nothing can make me forget her. I have never consoled myself for her loss. And that is not all; terrible doubts about Albert occurred to me. Was I really his father? Can you understand what my punishment was when I thought to myself, 'I have perhaps sacrificed my own son to the child of an utter stranger. This thought made me hate the bastard who called himself Commarin. To my great affection for him succeeded an unconquerable aversion. How often in those days I struggled against an insane desire to kill him! Since then I have learned to subdue my aversion; but I have never completely mastered it. Albert, sir, has been the best of sons. Nevertheless, there has always been an icy barrier between us, which he was unable to explain. I have often been on the point of appealing to the tribunals, of avowing all, of reclaiming my legitimate heir; but regard for my rank has prevented me. I recoiled before the scandal. I feared the ridicule or disgrace that would attach to my name; and yet I have not been able to save it from infamy.' The old nobleman remained silent after pronouncing these words. In a fit of despair he buried his face in his hands, and two great tears rolled silently down his wrinkled cheeks. In the mean time, the door of the room opened slightly, and the tall clerk's head appeared. M. Daburon signed to him to enter, and then addressing M. de Commarin, he said in a voice rendered more gentle by compassion: "Sir, in the eyes of heaven, as in the eyes of society, you have committed a great sin; and the results, as you see, are most disastrous. It is your duty to repair the evil consequences of your sin as much as lies in your power."—"Such is my intention, sir, and, may I say so? my dearest wish."—"You doubtless understand me," continued M. Daburon.—"Yes, sir," replied the old man; "yes, I understand you."

"It will be a consolation to you," added the magistrate, "to learn that M. Noel Gerdy is worthy in all respects of the high position that you are about to restore to him. He is a man of great talent, better and worthier than any one I know. You

will have a son worthy of his ancestors. And, finally, no one of your family has disgraced it, sir, for Vicomte Albert is not a Commarin."

"No," rejoined the comte quickly, "a Commarin would be dead at this hour; and blood washes all away."

The old nobleman's remark set the investigating magistrate thinking profoundly. "Are you, then, sure," said he, "of the vicomte's guilt?" M. de Commarin gave the magistrate a look of intense surprise. "I only arrived in Paris yesterday evening," he replied, "and I am entirely ignorant of all that has occurred. I only know that justice would not proceed without good cause against a man of Albert's rank. If you have arrested him, it is quite evident that you have something more than suspicion against him—that you possess positive proofs."

M. Daburon bit his lips, and for a moment could not conceal a feeling of displeasure. He had neglected his usual prudence, had moved too quickly. He had believed the comte's mind entirely upset; and now he had aroused his distrust. All the skill in the world could not repair such an unfortunate mistake. A witness on his guard is no longer a witness to be depended upon; he trembles for fear of compromising himself, measures the weight of the questions, and hesitates as to his answers. On the other hand, justice, in the form of a magistrate, is disposed to doubt everything, to imagine everything, and to suspect everybody. How far was the comte a stranger to the crime at La Jonchere? Although doubting Albert's paternity, he would certainly have made great efforts to save him. His story showed that he thought his honor in peril just as much as his son. Was he not the man to suppress, by every means, an inconvenient witness? Thus reasoned M. Daburon. And yet he could not clearly see how the Comte de Commarin's interests were concerned in the matter. This uncertainty made him very uneasy. "Sir," he asked more sternly, "when were you informed of the discovery of your secret?"

"Last evening, by Albert himself. He spoke to me of this sad story in a way which I now seek in vain to explain, unless—" The comte stopped short, as if his reason had been struck by the improbability of the supposition which he had formed. "Unless!" inquired the magistrate eagerly.—"Sir," said the comte, without replying directly, "Albert is a hero if he is not guilty."

"Ah!" said the magistrate quickly, "have you, then, reason

to think him innocent?" M. Daburon's spite was so plainly visible in the tone of his words that M. de Commarin could and ought to have seen the semblance of an insult. He started, evidently offended, and, rising, said: "I am now no more a witness for than I was a moment ago a witness against. I desire only to render what assistance I can to justice, in accordance with my duty."

"Confound it," said M. Daburon to himself, "here I have offended him now! Is this the way to do things, making mistake after mistake?"

"The facts are these," resumed the comte. "Yesterday, after having spoken to me of these cursed letters, Albert began to set a trap to discover the truth—for he still had doubts, Noel Gerdy not having obtained the complete correspondence. An animated discussion arose between us. He declared his resolution to give way to Noel. I, on the other hand, was resolved to compromise the matter, cost what it might. Albert dared to oppose me. All my efforts to convert him to my views were useless. Vainly I tried to touch those chords in his breast which I supposed the most sensitive. He firmly repeated his intention to retire in spite of me, declaring himself satisfied if I would consent to allow him a modest competence. I again attempted to shake him by showing him that his marriage, so ardently looked forward to for two years, would be broken off by this blow. He replied that he felt sure of the constancy of his betrothed, Mademoiselle d'Arlange."

This name fell like a thunderbolt upon the ears of the investigating magistrate. He jumped in his chair. Feeling that his face was turning crimson, he took up a large bundle of papers from his table, and, to hide his emotion, he raised them to his face, as though trying to decipher an illegible word. He began to understand the difficult duty with which he was charged. He knew that he was troubled like a child, having neither his usual calmness nor foresight. He felt that he might commit the most serious blunders. Why had he undertaken this investigation? Could he preserve himself quite free from bias? Did he think his will would be perfectly impartial? Gladly would he put off to another time the further examination of the comte; but could he? His conscience told him that this would be another blunder. He renewed, then, the painful examination. "Sir," said he, "the sentiments expressed by the vicomte are very fine, without doubt; but did he not mention

Widow Lerouge?"—"Yes," replied the comte, who appeared suddenly to brighten, as by the remembrance of some unnoticed circumstances—"yes, certainly."—"He must have shown you that this woman's testimony rendered a struggle with M. Gerdy impossible."

"Precisely, sir; and, aside from the question of duty, it was upon that that he based his refusal to follow my wishes."

"It will be necessary, comte, for you to repeat to me very exactly all that passed between the vicomte and yourself. Appeal, then, I beseech you, to your memory, and try to repeat his own words as nearly as possible." M. de Commarin could do so without much difficulty. For some little time a salutary reaction had taken place within him. His blood, excited by the persistence of the examination, moved in its accustomed course. His brain cleared itself. The scene of the previous evening was admirably presented to his memory, even to the most insignificant details. The sound of Albert's voice was still in his ears; he saw again his expressive gestures. As his story advanced, alive with clearness and precision, M. Daburon's conviction became more confirmed. The magistrate turned against Albert precisely that which the day before had won the comte's admiration. "What wonderful acting!" thought he. "Tabaret is decidedly possessed of second-sight. To his inconceivable boldness this young man joins an infernal cleverness. The genius of crime itself inspires him. It is a miracle that we are able to unmask him. How well everything was foreseen and arranged? How marvelously this scene with his father was brought about, in order to procure doubt in case of discovery? There is not a sentence which lacks a purpose, which does not tend to ward off suspicion. What refinement of execution? What excessive care for details! Nothing is wanting, not even the great devotion of his betrothed. Has he really informed Claire? Probably I might find out; but I should have to see her again, to speak to her. Poor child! to love such a man! But his plan is now fully exposed. His discussion with the comte was his plank of safety. It committed him to nothing, and gained time. He would of course raise objections, since they would only end by binding him the more firmly in his father's heart. He could thus make a merit of his compliance, and would ask a reward for his weakness. And when Noel returned to the charge, he would find himself in presence of the comte, who would boldly deny everything,

politely refuse to have anything to do with him, and would possibly have him driven out of the house as an impostor and forger."

It was a strange coincidence, but yet easily explained, that M. de Commarin, while telling his story, arrived at the same ideas as the magistrate, and at conclusions almost identical. In fact, why that persistence with respect to Claudine? He remembered plainly, that, in his anger, he had said to his son, "Mankind is not in the habit of doing such fine actions for its own satisfaction." That great disinterestedness was now explained.

When the comte had ceased speaking, M. Daburon said: "I thank you, sir. I can say nothing positive; but justice has weighty reasons to believe that, in the scene which you have just related to me, Vicomte Albert played a part previously arranged."—"And well arranged," murmured the comte; "for he deceived me!" He was interrupted by the entrance of Noel, who carried under his arm a black shagreen portfolio, ornamented with his monogram. The barrister bowed to the old gentleman, who in his turn rose and retired politely to the end of the room. "Sir," said Noel, in an undertone to the magistrate, "you will find all the letters in this portfolio. I must ask permission to leave you at once, as Madame Gerdy's condition grows hourly more alarming."

Noel had raised his voice a little, in pronouncing these last words; and the comte heard them. He started, and made a great effort to restrain the question which leaped from his heart to his lips. "You must however give me a moment, my dear sir," replied the magistrate. M. Daburon then quitted his chair, and, taking the barrister by the hand, led him to the comte. "M. de Commarin," said he, "I have the honor of presenting to you M. Noel Gerdy." M. de Commarin was probably expecting some scene of this kind, for not a muscle of his face moved; he remained perfectly calm. Noel, on his side, was like a man who had received a blow on the head; he staggered, and was obliged to seek support from the back of a chair. Then these two, father and son, stood face to face, apparently deep in thought, but in reality examining one another with mutual distrust, each striving to gather something of the other's thoughts. M. Daburon had augured better results from this meeting, which he had been awaiting ever since the comte's arrival. He had expected that this abrupt presentation would bring about an intensely pathetic scene,

which would not give his two witnesses time for reflection. The comte would open his arms; Noel would throw himself into them; and this reconciliation would only await the sanction of the tribunals, to be complete. The coldness of the one, the embarrassment of the other, disconcerted his plans. He therefore thought it necessary to intervene. "Comte," said he reproachfully, "remember that it was only a few minutes ago that you admitted that M. Gerdy was your legitimate son." M. de Commarin made no reply; to judge from his lack of emotion, he could not have heard. So Noel, summoning all his courage, venture to speak first. "Sir," he stammered, "I entertain no—"

"You may call me father," interrupted the haughty old man, in a tone which was by no means affectionate. Then addressing the magistrate he said: "Can I be of any further use to you, sir?"

"Only to hear your evidence read over," replied M. Daburon, "and to sign it if you find everything correct. You can proceed, Constant," he added.

The tall clerk turned half round on his chair and commenced. He had a peculiar way of jabbering over what he had scrawled. He read very quickly, all at a stretch, without paying the least attention to either full stops or commas, questions or replies, but went on reading as long as his breath lasted. When he could go on no longer, he took a breath, and then continued as before. Unconsciously, he reminded one of a diver, who every now and then raise his head above water, obtains a supply of air, and disappears again. Noel was the only one to listen attentively to the reading, which to unpractised ears was unintelligible. It apprised him of many things which it was important for him to know. At last Constant pronounced the words, "In testimony whereof," etc., which end all official reports in France. He handed the pen to the comte, who signed without hesitation. The old nobleman then turned toward Noel. "I am not very strong," he said; "you must therefore, my son," emphasizing the word, "help your father to his carriage."

The young barrister advanced eagerly. His face brightened, as he passed the count's arm through his own. When they were gone M. Daburon could not resist an impulse of curiosity. He hastened to the door, which he opened slightly; and, keeping his body in the background, that he might not himself be



seen, he looked out into the passage. The comte and Noel had not yet reached the end. They were going slowly. The comte seemed to drag heavily and painfully along; the barrister took short steps, bending slightly toward his father; and all his movements were marked with the greatest solicitude. The magistrate remained watching them until they passed out of sight at the end of the gallery. Then he returned to his seat, heaving a deep sigh. "At least," thought he, "I have helped to make one person happy. The day will not be entirely a bad one."

But he had no time to give way to his thoughts, the hours flew by so quickly. He wished to interrogate Albert as soon as possible; and he had still to receive the evidence of several of the comte's servants, and the report of the commissary of police charged with the arrest. The servants who had been waiting their turn a long while, were now brought in without delay, and examined separately. They had but little information to give; but the testimony of each was, so to say, a fresh accusation. It was easy to see that all believed their master guilty. Albert's conduct since the beginning of the fatal week, his least words, his most insignificant movements, were reported, commented upon, and explained. The man who lives in the midst of thirty servants is like an insect in a glass box under the magnifying glass of a naturalist. Not one of his acts escapes their notice; he can scarcely have a secret of his own; and, if they can not divine what it is, they at least know that he has one. From morn till night, he is the point of observation for thirty pairs of eyes, interested in studying the slightest changes in his countenance. The magistrate obtained, therefore, an abundance of those frivolous details which seem nothing at first; but the slightest of which may, at the trial, become a question of life or death. By combining these depositions, reconciling them and putting them in order, M. Daburon was able to follow his prisoner hour by hour from the Sunday morning. Directly Noel left, the vicomte gave orders that all visitors should be informed that he had gone into the country. From that moment, the whole household perceived that something had gone wrong with him, that he was very much annoyed, or very unwell. He did not leave his study on that day, but had his dinner brought up to him. He ate very little—only some soup, and a very thin fillet of sole with white wine. While eating, he said to M. Courtois,

the butler: "Remind the cook to spice the sauce a little more, in future," and then added in a low tone, "Ah! to what purpose?" In the evening he dismissed his servants from all duties, saying, "Go, and amuse yourselves." He expressly warned them not to disturb him unless he rang. On the Monday, he did not get up until noon, although usually an early riser. He complained of a violent headache, and of feeling sick. He took, however a cup of tea. He ordered his brougham, but almost immediately countermanded the order. Lubin, his valet, heard him say: "I am hesitating too much"; and a few moments later, "I must make up my mind." Shortly afterward he began writing. He then gave Lubin a letter to carry to Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange, with orders to deliver it only to herself or to Mademoiselle Schmidt, the governess. A second letter, containing two thousand-frank notes, was intrusted to Joseph, to be taken to the vicomte's club. Joseph no longer remembered the name of the person to whom the letter was addressed; but it was not a person of title. That evening, Albert only took a little soup, and remained shut up in his room.

He rose early on the Tuesday. He wandered about the house, as though he was in great trouble, or impatiently awaiting something which did not arrive. On his going into the garden, the gardener asked his advice concerning a lawn. He replied, "You had better consult the comte upon his return." He did not breakfast any more than the day before. About one o'clock, he went down to the stables, and caressed, with an air of sadness, his favorite mare, Norma. Stroking her neck, he said, "Poor creature! poor old girl!" At three o'clock, a messenger arrived with a letter. The vicomte took it, and opened it hastily. He was then near the flower-garden. Two footmen distinctly heard him say, "She can not resist." He returned to the house, and burned the letter in a large stove in the hall. As he was sitting down to dinner, at six o'clock, two of his friends, M. de Courtivois and the Marquis de Chouze, insisted upon seeing him, in spite of all orders. They would not be refused. These gentlemen were anxious for him to join them in some pleasure party, but he declined, saying that he had a very important appointment. At dinner he ate a little more than on the previous days. He even asked the butler for a bottle of Chateau-Lafite, the whole of which he drank himself. While taking his coffee, he smoked a cigar

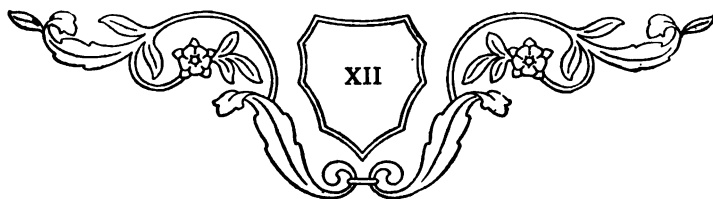
in the dining-room, contrary to the rules of the house. At half-past seven, according to Joseph and two footmen, or at eight according to the Swiss porter and Lubin, the vicomte went out on foot, taking an umbrella with him. He returned home at two o'clock in the morning, and at once dismissed his valet, who had waited up for him. On entering the vicomte's room on the Wednesday, the valet was struck with the condition in which he found his master's clothes. They were wet, and stained with mud; the trousers were torn. He ventured to make a remark about them. Albert replied, in a furious manner, "Throw the old things in a corner, ready to be given away." He appeared to be much better all that day. He breakfasted with a good appetite; and the butler noticed that he was in excellent spirits. He passed the afternoon in the library, and burned a pile of papers. On the Thursday, he again seemed very unwell. He was scarcely able to go and meet the comte. That evening, after his interview with his father, he went to his room looking extremely ill. Lubin wanted to run for the doctor; he forbade him to do so, or to mention to any one that he was not well.

Such was the substance of twenty large pages, which the tall clerk had covered with writing, without once turning his head to look at the witnesses who passed by in their fine livery. M. Daburon managed to obtain this evidence in less than two hours. Though well aware of the importance of their testimony, all these servants were very voluble. The difficulty was, to stop them when they had once started. From all they said, it appeared that Albert was a very good master—easily served, kind and polite to his servants. Wonderful to relate! there were found three among them who did not appear perfectly delighted at the misfortune which had befallen the family. Two were greatly distressed. M. Lubin, although he had been an object of especial kindness, was not one of these.

The turn of the commissary of police had now come. In a few words, he gave an account of the arrest, already described by old Tabaret. He did not forget to mention the one word "Lost," which had escaped Albert; to his mind, it was a confession. He then delivered all the articles seized in the Vicomte de Commarin's apartments. The magistrate carefully examined these things, and compared them closely with the scraps of evidence gathered at La Jonchere. He soon appeared, more than ever satisfied with the course he had taken. He then

placed all these material proofs upon his table, and covered them over with three or four large sheets of paper. The day was far advanced; and M. Daburon had no more than sufficient time to examine the prisoner before night. He now remembered that he had tasted nothing since morning; and he sent hastily for a bottle of wine and some biscuits. It was not strength, however, that the magistrate needed; it was courage. All the while that he was eating and drinking, his thoughts kept repeating this strange sentence, "I am about to appear before the Vicomte de Commarin." At any other time, he would have laughed at the absurdity of the idea, but, at this moment, it seemed to him like the will of Providence.

"So be it," said he to himself; "this is my punishment." And immediately he gave the necessary orders for Vicomte Albert to be brought before him.



**A**LBERT scarcely noticed his removal from home to the seclusion of the prison. Snatched away from his painful thoughts by the harsh voice of the commissary, saying, "In the name of the law I arrest you," his mind, completely upset, was a long time in recovering its equilibrium. Everything that followed appeared to him to float indistinctly in a thick mist, like those dream-scenes represented on the stage behind a quadruple curtain of gauze. To the questions put to him he replied, without knowing what he said. Two police agents took hold of his arms, and helped him down the stairs. He could not have walked down alone. His limbs, which bent beneath him, refused their support. The only thing he understood of all that was said around him was that the comte had been struck with apoplexy; but even that he soon forgot. They lifted him into the cab, which was waiting in the court-yard at the foot of the steps, rather ashamed at finding itself in such a place; and by placing him on the back seat. Two police agents installed themselves in front of him; while a third mounted the box by the side of the driver. During the

drive, he did not at all realize his situation. He lay perfectly motionless in the dirty, greasy vehicle. His body, which followed every jolt, scarcely allayed by the worn-out springs, rolled from one side to the other; and his head oscillated on his shoulders, as if the muscles of his neck were broken. He thought of Widow Lerouge. He recalled her as she was when he went with his father to La Jonchere. It was in the spring-time; and the hawthorn blossoms scented the air. The old woman, in a white cap, stood at her garden gate; she spoke beseechingly. The count looked sternly at her as he listened; then, taking some gold from his purse, he gave it to her.

On arriving at their destination they lifted him out of the cab, the same way as they had lifted him in at starting. During the formality of entering his name in the jail book, in the dingy, stinking record office, and while replying mechanically to everything, he gave himself up with delight to recollections of Claire. He went back to the time of the early days of their love, when he doubted whether he would ever have the happiness of being loved by her in return; when they used to meet at Mademoiselle Goello's. This old maid had a house on the left bank of the Seine, furnished in the most eccentric manner. On all the drawing-room furniture, and on the mantelpiece, were placed a dozen or fifteen stuffed dogs, of various breeds, which together or successively had helped to cheer the maiden's lonely hours. She loved to relate stories of these pets, whose affection had never failed her. Some were grotesque, others horrible. One especially, outrageously stuffed, seemed ready to burst. How many times he and Claire had laughed at it until the tears came!

The officials next began to search him. This crowning humiliation, those rough hands passing all over his body, brought him somewhat to himself, and roused his anger. But it was already over; they at once dragged him along the dark corridors, over the filthy, slippery floor. They opened a door, and pushed him into a small cell. He then heard them lock and bolt the door. He was a prisoner, and, in accordance with special orders, in solitary confinement. He immediately felt a marked sensation of comfort. He was alone. No more stifled whispers, harsh voices, implacable questions, sounded in his ears. A profound silence reigned around. It seemed to him that he had forever escaped from society; and he rejoiced at it. He would have felt relieved, had this even been

the silence of the grave. His body, as well as his mind, was weighted down with weariness. He wanted to sit down, when he perceived a small bed, to the right, in front of the grated window, which let in the little light there was. This bed was as welcome to him as a plank would be to a drowning man. He threw himself upon it, and lay down with delight; but he felt cold, so he unfolded the coarse woollen coverlid, and wrapping it about him, was soon sound asleep.

In the corridor, two detectives, one still young, the other rather old, applied alternately their eyes and ears to the peephole in the door, watching every movement of the prisoner: "What a fellow he is!" murmured the younger officer. "If a man has no more nerve than that, he ought to remain honest. He won't care much about his looks the morning of his execution, eh, M. Balan?"—"That depends," replied the other. "We must wait and see. Lecoq told me that he was a terrible rascal."—"Ah! look, he arranges his bed and lies down. Can he be going to sleep? That's good! It's the first time I ever saw such a thing."—"It is because, comrade, you have only had dealings with the smaller rogues. All rascals of position—and I have had to do with more than one—are this sort. At the moment of arrest, they are incapable of anything; their heart fails them; but they recover themselves next day."—"Upon my word, one would say he has gone to sleep! What a joke!"—"I tell you, my friend," added the old man, pointedly, "that nothing is more natural. I am sure that, since the blow was struck, this young fellow has hardly lived: his body has been all on fire. Now he knows that his secret is out; and that quiets him."—"Ha, ha! M. Balan, you are joking: you say that that quiets him?"—"Certainly. There is no greater punishment, remember, than anxiety; everything is preferable. If you only possessed an income of ten thousand francs, I would show you a way to prove this. I would tell you to go to Hamburg and risk your entire fortune on one chance at *rouge et noir*. You could relate to me, afterward, what your feelings were while the ball was rolling. It is, my boy, as though your brain was being torn with pincers, as though molten lead was being poured into your bones, in place of marrow. This anxiety is so strong that one feels relieved, one breathes again, even when one has lost. It is ruin; but then the anxiety is over."—"Really, M. Balan, one would think that you yourself had had just such an experience."—"Alas!" sighed the old de-

tective, "it is to my love, queen of spades, my unhappy love, that you owe the honor of looking through this peep-hole in my company. But this fellow will sleep for a couple of hours, do not lose sight of him; I am going to smoke a cigarette in the courtyard."

Albert slept four hours. On awaking his head seemed clearer than it had been ever since his interview with Noel. It was a terrible moment for him when, for the first time, he became fully aware of his situation. "Now, indeed," said he, "I require all my courage." He longed to see some one, to speak, to be questioned, to explain. He felt a desire to call out. "But what good would that be?" he asked himself. "Some one will be coming soon." He looked for his watch, to see what time it was, and found that they had taken it away. He felt this deeply; they were treating him like the most abandoned of villains. He felt in his pockets: they had all been carefully emptied. He thought now of his personal appearance; and, getting up, he repaired, as much as possible the disorder of his toilet. He put his clothes in order, and dusted them; he straightened his collar, and retied his cravat. Then pouring a little water on his handkerchief, he passed it over his face, bathing his eyes, which were greatly inflamed. Then he endeavored to smooth his beard and hair. He had no idea that four lynx eyes were fixed upon him all the while.

"Good!" murmured the young detective: "see how our cock sticks up his comb, and smooths his feathers!"

"I told you," put in Balan, "that he was only staggered. Hush! he is speaking, I believe."

But they neither surprised one of those disordered gestures nor one of those incoherent speeches, which almost always escape from the feeble when excited by fear, or from the imprudent ones who believe in the discretion of their cells. One word alone, "honor," reached the ears of the two spies. "These rascals of rank," grumbled Balan, "always have this word in their mouths. That which they most fear is the opinion of some dozen friends, and several thousand strangers, who read the 'Gazette des Tribunaux.' They only think of their own heads later on."

When the gendarmes came to conduct Albert before the investigating magistrate, they found him seated on the side of his bed, his feet pressed upon the iron rail, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands. He rose as they en-

tered, and took a few steps toward them; but his throat was so dry that he was scarcely able to speak. He asked for a moment, and, turning toward the little table, he filled and drank two large glassfuls of water in succession. "I am ready!" he then said. And, with a firm step, he followed the gendarmes along the passage which led to the Palais de Justice.

M. Daburon was just then in great anguish. He walked furiously up and down his office, awaiting the prisoner. Again, and for the twentieth time since morning, he regretted having engaged in the business. "Curse this absurd point of honor, which I have obeyed," he inwardly exclaimed. "I in vain attempt to reassure myself by the aid of sophisms. I was wrong in not withdrawing. Nothing in the world can change my feelings toward this young man. I hate him. I am his judge; and it is no less true that at one time I longed to assassinate him. I faced him with a revolver in my hand: why did I not present it and fire? Do I know why? What power held my finger, when an almost insensible pressure would have sufficed to kill him? I can not say. Why is not he the judge and I the assassin? If the intention was as punishable as the deed, I ought to be guillotined. And it is under such conditions that I dare examine him!" Passing before the door he heard the heavy footsteps of the gendarmes in the passage. "It is he," he said aloud; and then hastily seated himself at his table, bending over his portfolios, as though striving to hide himself. If the tall clerk had used his eyes, he would have noticed the singular spectacle of an investigating magistrate more agitated than the prisoner he was about to examine. But he was blind to all around him; and, at this moment, he was only aware of an error of fifteen centimes, which had slipped into his accounts, and which he was unable to rectify. Albert entered the magistrate's office with his head erect. His features bore traces of great fatigue and of sleepless nights. He was very pale; but his eyes were clear and sparkling.

The usual questions which open such examinations gave M. Daburon an opportunity to recover himself. Fortunately, he had found time in the morning to prepare a plan, which he had now simply to follow. "You are aware, sir," he commenced in a tone of perfect politeness, "that you have no right to the name you bear?"

"I know, sir," replied Albert, "that I am the natural son of M. de Commarin. I know further that my father would be



unable to recognize me, even if he wished to, since I was born during his married life."

"What were your feelings upon learning this?"

"I should speak falsely, sir, if I had said I did not feel very bitterly. When one is in the high position I occupied, the fall is terrible. However, I never for a moment entertained the thought of contesting M. Noel Gerdy's rights. I always purposed, and still purpose, to yield. I have so informed M. de Commarin."

M. Daburon expected just such a reply; and it only strengthened his suspicions. Did it not enter into the line of defense which he had foreseen? It was now his duty to seek some way of demolishing this defense, in which the prisoner evidently meant to shut himself up like a tortoise in its shell. "You could not oppose M. Gerdy," continued the magistrate, "with any chance of success. You had, indeed, on your side, the comte, and your mother; but M. Gerdy was in possession of evidence that was certain to win his cause, that of Widow Lerouge."—"I have never doubted that, sir."—"Now," continued the magistrate, seeking to hide the look which he fastened upon Albert, "justice supposes that, to do away with the only existing proof, you have assassinated Widow Lerouge."

This terrible accusation, terribly emphasized, caused no change in Albert's features. He preserved the same firm bearing, without bravado. "Before God," he answered, "and by all that is most sacred on earth, I swear to you, sir, that I am innocent! I am at this moment a close prisoner, without communication with the outer world, reduced consequently to the most absolute helplessness. It is through your probity that I hope to demonstrate my innocence."

"What an actor!" thought the magistrate. "Can crime be so strong as this?" He glanced over his papers, reading certain passages of the preceding depositions, turning down the corners of certain pages which contained important information. Then suddenly he resumed: "When you were arrested, you cried out: 'I am lost.' What did you mean by that?"

"Sir," replied Albert, "I remember having uttered those words. When I knew of what crime I was accused, I was overwhelmed with consternation. My mind was, as it were, enlightened by a glimpse of the future. In a moment, I perceived all the horror of my situation. I understood the weight of the accusation, its probability, and the difficulties I should

have in defending myself. A voice cried out to me: 'Who was most interested in Claudine's death?' And the knowledge of my imminent peril forced from me the exclamation you speak of."

His explanation was more than plausible, was possible, and even likely. It had the advantage, too, of anticipating the axiom: "Search out the one whom the crime will benefit!" Tabaret had spoken truly, when he said that they would not easily make the prisoner confess. M. Daburon admired Albert's presence of mind, and the resources of his perverse imagination.

"You do indeed," continued the magistrate, "appear to have had the greatest interest in this death. Moreover, I will inform you that robbery was not the object of the crime. The things thrown into the Seine have been recovered. We know, also, that all the widow's papers were burned. Could they compromise any one but yourself? If you know of any one, speak."—"What can I answer, sir? Nothing."—"Have you often gone to see this woman?"—"Three or four times with my father."—"One of your coachmen pretends to have driven you there at least ten times."—"The man is mistaken. But what matters the number of visits?"—"Do you recollect the arrangements of the rooms? Can you describe them?"—"Perfectly, sir: there were two. Claudine slept in the back room."—"You were in no way a stranger to Widow Lerouge. If you had knocked one evening at her window-shutter, do you think she would have let you in?"—"Certainly, sir, and eagerly."—"You have been unwell these last few days?"—"Very unwell, to say the least, sir. My body bent under the weight of a burden too great for my strength. It was not, however, for want of courage."—"Why did you forbid your valet, Lubin, to call in the doctor?"—"Ah, sir, how could the doctor cure my disease? All his science could not make me the legitimate son of the Comte de Commarin."—"Some very singular remarks made by you were overheard. You seemed to be no longer interested in anything concerning your home. You destroyed a large number of papers and letters."—"I had decided to leave the comte, sir. My resolution explains my conduct."

Albert replied promptly to the magistrate's questions, without the least embarrassment, and in a confident tone. His voice, which was very pleasant to the ear, did not tremble. It concealed no emotion; it retained its pure and vibrating sound.

M. Daburon deemed it wise to suspend the examination for a short time. With so cunning an adversary, he was evidently pursuing a false course. To proceed in detail was folly; he neither intimidated the prisoner, nor made him break through his reserve. It was necessary to take him unawares.

"Sir," resumed the magistrate, abruptly, "tell me exactly how you passed your time last Tuesday evening, from six o'clock until midnight?"

For the first time, Albert seemed disconcerted. His glance, which had, till then, been fixed upon the magistrate, wavered. "During Tuesday evening," he stammered, repeating the phrase to gain time.

"I have him," thought the magistrate, starting with joy, and then added aloud: "Yes, from six o'clock until midnight."

"I am afraid, sir," answered Albert, "it will be difficult for me to satisfy you. I haven't a very good memory."

"Oh, don't tell me that!" interrupted the magistrate. "If I had asked what you were doing three months ago, on a certain evening, and at a certain hour, I could understand your hesitation; but this is about Tuesday, and it is now Friday. Moreover, this day, so close, was the last of the carnival; it was Shrove Tuesday. That circumstance ought to help your memory."

"That evening I went out walking," murmured Albert.—"Now," continued the magistrate, "where did you dine?"—"At home, as usual."—"No, not as usual. At the end of your meal, you asked for a bottle of Bordeaux, of which you drank the whole. You doubtless had need of some extra excitement for your subsequent plans."—"I had no plans," replied the prisoner with very evident uneasiness.—"You make a mistake. Two friends came to seek you. You replied to them, before sitting down to dinner, that you had a very important engagement to keep."—"That was only a polite way of getting rid of them."—"Why?"—"Can you not understand, sir? I was resigned, but not comforted. I was learning to get accustomed to the terrible blow. Would not one seek solitude in the great crisis of one's life?"—"The prosecution pretends that you wished to be left alone that you might go to La Jonchere. During the day you said: 'She can not resist me.' Of whom were you speaking?"—"Of some one to whom I had written the evening before, and who had replied to me. I spoke the words, with her letter still in my hands."—"This letter was, then,

from a woman?"—"Yes."—"What have you done with it?"—"I have burned it."—"This precaution leads one to suppose that you considered the letter compromising."—"Not at all, sir; it treated entirely of private matters."

M. Daburon was sure that this letter came from Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Should he nevertheless ask the question, and again hear pronounced the name of Claire, which always aroused such painful emotions within him? He ventured to do so, leaning over his papers, so that the prisoner could not detect his emotion. "From whom did this letter come?" he asked.

"From one whom I can not name."

"Sir," said the magistrate severely, "I will not conceal from you that your position is greatly compromised. Do not aggravate it by this culpable reticence. You are here to tell everything, sir."

"My own affairs, yes, not those of others."

Albert gave this last answer in a dry tone. He was giddy, flurried, exasperated, by the prying and irritating mode of the examination, which scarcely gave him time to breathe. The magistrate's questions fell upon him more thickly than the blows of the blacksmith's hammer upon the red-hot iron which he is anxious to beat into shape before it cools. The apparent rebellion of his prisoner troubled M. Daburon a great deal. He was further extremely surprised to find the discernment of the old detective at fault; just as though Tabaret were infallible. Tabaret had predicted an unexceptionable alibi; and this alibi was not forthcoming. Why? Had this subtle villain something better than that? What artful defense had he to fall back upon? Doubtless he kept in reserve some unforeseen stroke, perhaps irresistible. "Gently," thought the magistrate. "I have not got him yet." Then he quickly added aloud: "Continue. After dinner what did you do?"—"I went out for a walk."—"Not immediately. The bottle emptied, you smoked a cigar in the dining-room, which was so unusual as to be noticed. What kind of cigars do you usually smoke?"—"Trabucos."—"Do you not use a cigar-holder, to keep your lips from contact with the tobacco?"—"Yes, sir," replied Albert, much surprised at this series of questions.—"At what time did you go out?"—"About eight o'clock."—"Did you carry an umbrella?"—"Yes."—"Where did you go?"—"I walked about."—"Alone, without any object, all the evening?"—"Yes, sir."—"Now trace out your wanderings for me very carefully."

"Ah, sir, that is very difficult to do! I went out simply to walk about, for the sake of exercise, to drive away the torpor which had depressed me for three days. I don't know whether you can picture to yourself my exact condition. I was half out of my mind. I walked about at hazard along the quays. I wandered through the streets—"

"All that is very improbable," interrupted the magistrate. M. Daburon, however, knew that it was at least possible. Had not he himself, one night, in a similar condition, traversed all Paris? What reply could he have made, had some one asked him next morning where he had been, except that he had not paid attention, and did not know? But he had forgotten this; and his previous hesitations, too, had all vanished. As the inquiry advanced, the fever of investigation took possession of him. He enjoyed the emotions of the struggle, his passion for his calling became stronger than ever. He was again an investigating magistrate, like the fencing master, who, once practising with his dearest friend, became excited by the clash of the weapons, and, forgetting himself, killed him.

"So," resumed M. Daburon, "you met absolutely no one who can affirm that he saw you? You did not speak to a living soul? You entered no place, not even a cafe, or a theatre, or a tobacconist's to light one of your favorite trabucos?"

"No sir."

"Well, it is a great misfortune for you, yes, a very great misfortune; for I must inform you that it was precisely during this Tuesday evening, between eight o'clock and midnight, that Widow Lerouge was assassinated. Justice can point out the exact hour. Again, sir, in your own interest, I recommend you to reflect—to make a strong appeal to your memory."

This pointing out of the exact day and hour of the murder seemed to astound Albert. He raised his hand to his forehead with a despairing gesture. However, he replied in a calm voice: "I am very unfortunate, sir: but I can recollect nothing." M. Daburon's surprise was immense. What, not an alibi? Nothing? This could be no snare nor system of defense. Was, then, this man as cunning as he had imagined? Doubtless. Only he had been taken unawares. He had never imagined it possible for the accusation to fall upon him; and it was almost by a miracle it had done so. The magistrate slowly raised, one by one, the large pieces of paper that covered the articles seized in Albert's rooms. "We will pass," he continued, "to the ex-

amination of the charges which weigh against you. Will you please come nearer? Do you recognize these articles as belonging to yourself?"—"Yes, sir, they are all mine."—"Well, take this foil. Who broke it?"—"I, sir, in fencing with M. de Courtivois, who can bear witness to it."—"He will be heard. Where is the broken end?"—"I do not know. You must ask Lubin, my valet."—"Exactly. He declares that he has hunted for it, and can not find it. I must tell you that the victim received the fatal blow from the sharpened end of a broken foil. This piece of stuff, on which the assassin wiped his weapon, is a proof of what I state."—"I beseech you, sir, to order a most minute search to be made. It is impossible that the other half of the foil is not to be found."—"Orders shall be given to that effect. Look, here is the exact imprint of the murderer's foot traced on this sheet of paper. I will place one of your boots upon it; and the sole, as you perceive, fits the tracing with the utmost precision. This plaster was poured into the hollow left by the heel: you observe that it is, in all respects, similar in shape to the heels of your own boots. I perceive, too, the mark of a peg, which appears in both."

Albert followed with marked anxiety every movement of the magistrate. It was plain that he was struggling against a growing terror. Was he attacked by that fright which overpowers the guilty when they see themselves on the point of being confounded. To all the magistrate's remarks, he answered in a low voice: "It is true—perfectly true."

"That is so," continued M. Daburon; "yet listen further, before attempting to defend yourself. The criminal had an umbrella. The end of this umbrella sank in the clayey soil; the round of wood which is placed at the end of the silk was found molded in the clay. Look at this clod of clay, raised with the utmost care; and now look at your umbrella. Compare the rounds. Are they alike, or not?"

"These things, sir," attempted Albert, "are manufactured in large quantities."

"Well, we will pass over that proof. Look at this cigar end, found on the scene of the crime, and tell me of what brand it is, and how it was smoked."

"It is a trabucos, and was smoked in a cigar-holder."

"Like these?" persisted the magistrate, pointing to the cigars and the amber and meerschaum-holders found in the vicomte's library.

"Yes!" murmured Albert, "it is a fatality—a strange coincidence."

"Patience; that is nothing, as yet. The assassin wore gloves. The victim, in the death struggle, seized his hands; and some pieces of kid remained in her nails. These have been preserved, and are here. They are of a lavender color, are they not? Now, here are the gloves which you wore on Tuesday. They, too, are lavender, and they are frayed. Compare these pieces of kid with your own gloves. Do they not correspond? Are they not of the same color, the same skin?" It was useless to deny it, equivocate, or seek subterfuges. The evidence was there, and it was irrefutable. While appearing to occupy himself solely with the objects lying upon his table, M. Daburon did not lose sight of the prisoner. Albert was terrified. A cold perspiration bathed his temples, and glided drop by drop down his cheeks. His hands trembled so much that they were of no use to him. In a choking voice he kept repeating: "It is horrible, horrible!"

"Finally," pursued the inexorable magistrate, "here are the trousers you wore on the evening of the murder. It is plain that not long ago they were very wet; and, besides the mud on them, there are traces of earth. Besides that, they are torn at the knees. We will admit, for the moment, that you might not remember where you went on that evening; but who would believe that you do not know where you tore your trousers and how you frayed your gloves!"

What courage could resist such assaults? Albert's firmness and energy were at an end. His brain whirled. He fell heavily into a chair, exclaiming: "It is enough to drive me mad!"

"Do you admit," insisted the magistrate, whose gaze had become firmly fixed upon the prisoner, "do you admit that Widow Lerouge could only have been stabbed by you?"

"I admit," protested Albert, "that I am the victim of one of those terrible fatalities which make men doubt the evidence of their reason. I am innocent."

"Then tell me where you passed Tuesday evening."

"Ah, sir!" cried the prisoner, "I should have to—" But, restraining himself, he added in a faint voice: "I have made the only answer that I can make."

M. Daburon rose, having now reached his grand stroke. "It is, then, my duty," said he, with a shade of irony, "to supply your failure of memory. I am going to remind you of where

you went and what you did. On Tuesday evening, at eight o'clock, after having obtained from the wine you drank the dreadful energy you needed, you left your home. At thirty-five minutes past eight, you took the train at the St. Lazare station. At nine o'clock, you alighted at the station at Reuil." And, not disdaining to employ old Tabaret's ideas, the investigating magistrate repeated nearly word for word the tirade improvised the night before by the amateur detective. He had every reason, while speaking, to admire the old fellow's penetration. In all his life, his eloquence had never produced so striking an effect. Every sentence, every word, told. The prisoner's assurance, already shaken, fell little by little, just like the outer coating of a wall when riddled with bullets. Albert was, as the magistrate perceived, like a man, who, rolling to the bottom of a precipice, sees every branch and every projection which might retard his fall fail him, and who feels a new and more painful bruise each time his body comes in contact with them.

"And now," concluded the investigating magistrate, "listen to good advice: do not persist in a system of denying, impossible to sustain. Give in. Justice, rest assured, is ignorant of nothing which it is important to know. Believe me; seek to deserve the indulgence of your judges; confess your guilt."

M. Daburon did not believe that his prisoner would still persist in asserting his innocence. He imagined he would be overwhelmed and confounded, that he would throw himself at his feet, begging for mercy. But he was mistaken. Albert, in spite of his great prostration, found, in one last effort of his will, sufficient strength to recover himself and again protest: "You are right, sir," he said in a sad but firm voice; "everything seems to prove me guilty. In your place, I should have spoken as you have done; yet all the same, I swear to you that I am innocent."

"Come now, do you really—" began the magistrate.

"I am innocent," interrupted Albert; "and I repeat it, without the least hope of changing in any way your conviction. Yes, everything speaks against me, everything, even my own bearing before you. It is true, my courage has been shaken by these incredible, miraculous, overwhelming coincidences. I am overcome, because I feel the impossibility of proving my innocence. But I do not despair. My honor and my life are in the hands of God. At this very hour when to you I appear lost—



for I in no way deceive myself, sir—I do not despair of a complete justification. I await confidently.”

“What do you mean?” asked the magistrate.—“Nothing but what I say, sir.”—“So you persist in denying your guilt?”—“I am innocent.”—“But this is folly.”—“I am innocent.”—“Very well,” said M. Daburon; “that is enough for to-day. You will hear the official report of your examination read, and will then be taken back to solitary confinement. I exhort you to reflect. Night will perhaps bring on a better feeling; if you wish at any time to speak to me, send word, and I will come to you. I will give orders to that effect. You may read now, Constant.”

When Albert had departed under the escort of the gendarmes, the magistrate muttered in a low tone: “There’s an obstinate fellow for you.” He certainly no longer entertained the shadow of a doubt. To him, Albert was as surely the murderer as if he had admitted his guilt. Even if he should persist in his system of denial to the end of the investigation, it was impossible that, with the proofs already in the possession of the police, a true bill should not be found against him. He was therefore certain of being committed for trial at the assizes. It was a hundred to one that the jury would bring in a verdict of guilty. Left to himself, however, M. Daburon did not experience that intense satisfaction, mixed with vanity, which he ordinarily felt after he had successfully conducted an examination, and had succeeded in getting his prisoner into the same position as Albert. Something disturbed and shocked him. At the bottom of his heart, he felt ill at ease. He had triumphed; but his victory gave him only uneasiness, pain, and vexation. A reflection so simple that he could hardly understand why it had not occurred to him at first increased his discontent, and made him angry with himself. “Something told me,” he muttered, “that I was wrong to undertake this business. I am punished for not having obeyed that inner voice. I ought to have declined to proceed with the investigation. The Vicomte de Commarin was, all the same, certain to be arrested, imprisoned, examined, confounded, tried, and probably condemned. Then, being in no way connected with the trial, I could have reappeared before Claire. Her grief will be great. As her friend, I could have soothed her, mingled my tears with hers, calmed her regrets. With time, she might have been consoled, and perhaps have forgotten him. She could not have helped feeling grateful to me, and then who knows—? While now,

whatever may happen, I shall be an object of loathing to her: she will never be able to endure the sight of me. In her eyes I shall always be her lover's assassin. I have with my own hands opened an abyss between her and myself which centuries could not fill up. I have lost her a second time, and by my own fault." The unhappy man heaped the bitterest reproaches upon himself. He was in despair. He had never so hated Albert—that wretch, who, stained with a crime, stood in the way of his happiness. Then, too, he cursed old Tabaret! Alone, he would not have decided so quickly. He would have waited, thought over the matter, matured his decision, and certainly have perceived the inconveniences which now occurred to him. The old fellow, always carried away like a badly trained bloodhound, and full of stupid enthusiasm, had confused him, and led him to do what he now so much regretted.

It was precisely this unfavorable moment that M. Tabaret chose for reappearing before the magistrate. He had just been informed of the termination of the inquiry; and he arrived, impatient to know what had passed, swelling with curiosity, and full of the sweet hope of hearing of the fulfilment of his predictions. "What answers did he make?" he asked even before he had closed the door.

"He is evidently guilty," replied the magistrate, with a harshness very different from his usual manner. Old Tabaret, who expected to receive praises by the basketful, was astounded at this tone! It was, therefore, with great hesitancy that he offered his further services. "I have come," he said modestly, "to know if any investigations are necessary to demolish the alibi pleaded by the prisoner."

"He pleaded no alibi," replied the magistrate, dryly.—"How," cried the detective, "no alibi? Pshaw! I ask pardon: he has, of course, then confessed everything."

"No," said the magistrate impatiently, "he has confessed nothing. He acknowledges that the proofs are decisive: he can not give an account of how he spent his time; but he protests his innocence." In the centre of the room, M. Tabaret stood with his mouth wide open, and his eyes staring wildly, and altogether in the most grotesque attitude his astonishment could effect. He was literally thunderstruck. In spite of his anger, M. Daburon could not help smiling: and even Constant gave a grin, which on his lips was equivalent to a paroxysm of laughter. "Not an alibi, nothing?" murmured the old fellow. "No

explanations? The idea! It is inconceivable! Not an alibi? We must then be mistaken: he can not be the criminal. That is certain!"

The investigating magistrate felt that the old amateur must have been waiting the result of the examination at the wine-shop round the corner, or else that he had gone mad. "Unfortunately," said he, "we are not mistaken. It is but too clearly shown that M. de Commarin is the murderer. However, if you like, you can ask Constant for his report of the examination, and read it over while I put these papers in order."—"Very well," said the old fellow with feverish anxiety. He sat down in Constant's chair, and, leaning his elbows on the table, thrusting his hands in his hair, he in less than no time read the report through. When he had finished, he arose with pale and distorted features. "Sir," said he to the magistrate in a strange voice, "I have been the involuntary cause of a terrible mistake. This man is innocent."

"Come, come," said M. Daburon, without stopping his preparations for departure, "you are going out of your mind, my dear M. Tabaret. How, after all that you have read there, can—"

"Yes, sir, yes: it is because I have read this that I entreat you to pause, or we shall add one more mistake to the sad list of judicial errors. Read this examination over carefully; there is not a reply but which declares this unfortunate man innocent, not a word but which throws out a ray of light. And he is still in prison, still in solitary confinement?"

"He is; and there he will remain, if you please," interrupted the magistrate. "It becomes you well to talk in this manner, after the way you spoke last night, when I hesitated so much."

"But, sir," cried the old detective, "I still say precisely the same. Ah, wretched Tabaret! all is lost; no one understands you. Pardon me, sir, if I lack the respect due to you; but you have not grasped my method. It is, however, very simple. Given a crime, with all the circumstances and details, I construct, bit by bit, a plan of accusation, which I do not guarantee until it is entire and perfect. If a man is found to whom this plan applies exactly in every particular the author of the crime is found: otherwise, one has laid hands upon an innocent person. It is not sufficient that such and such particulars seem to point to him; it must be all or nothing. This is infallible. Now, in this case, how have I reached the culprit? Through

proceeding by inference from the known to the unknown. I have examined his work; and I have formed an idea of the worker. Reason and logic lead us to what? To a villain, determined, audacious, and prudent, versed in the business. And do you think that such a man would neglect a precaution that would not be omitted by the stupidest tyro? It is inconceivable. What! this man is so skilful as to leave such feeble traces that they escape Gevrol's practised eye, and you think he would risk his safety by leaving an entire night unaccounted for? It's impossible! I am as sure of my system as of a sum that has been proved. The assassin has an alibi. Albert has pleaded none; then he is innocent."

M. Daburon surveyed the detective pityingly, much as he would have looked at a remarkable monomaniac. When the old fellow had finished: "My worthy M. Tabaret," the magistrate said to him: "you have but one fault. You err through an excess of subtlety, accord too freely to others the wonderful sagacity with which you yourself are endowed. Our man has failed in prudence, simply because he believed his rank would place him above suspicion."

"No, sir, no, a thousand times no. My culprit—the true one—he whom we have missed catching, feared everything. Besides, does Albert defend himself? No. He is overwhelmed because he perceives coincidences so fatal that they appear to condemn him, without a chance of escape. Does he try to excuse himself? No. He simply replies: 'It is terrible.' And yet all through his examination I feel reticence that I can not explain."

"I can explain it very easily; and I am as confident as though he had confessed everything. I have more than sufficient proofs for that."

"Ah, sir, proofs! There are always enough of those against an arrested man. They existed against every innocent man who was ever condemned. Proofs! Why, I had them in quantities against Kaiser, the poor little tailor, who—"

"Well," interrupted the magistrate, hastily, "if it is not he, the most interested one, who committed the crime, who then is it? His father, the Comte de Commarin?"

"No; the true assassin is a young man."

M. Daburon had arranged his papers and finished his preparations. He took up his hat, and, as he prepared to leave, replied: "You must then see that I am right! Come, good-by,

M. Tabaret, and make haste and get rid of all your foolish ideas. To-morrow we will talk the whole matter over again. I am rather tired to-night." Then he added, addressing his clerk, "Constant, look in at the record office, in case the prisoner Commarin should wish to speak to me." He moved toward the door; but M. Tabaret barred his exit. "Sir," said the old man, "in the name of heaven, listen to me! He is innocent, I swear to you. Help me, then, to find the real culprit. Sir, think of your remorse should you cause an—" But the magistrate would not hear more. He pushed old Tabaret quickly aside and hurried out. The old man now turned to Constant. He wished to convince him. Lost trouble: the tall clerk hastened to put his things away, thinking of his soup, which was getting cold. So that M. Tabaret soon found himself locked out of the room and alone in the dark passage. All the usual sounds of the Palais had ceased: the place was silent as the tomb. The old detective desperately tore his hair with both hands. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "Albert is innocent; and it is I who have cast suspicion upon him. It is I, fool that I am, who have infused into the obstinate spirit of this magistrate a conviction that I can no longer destroy. He is innocent, and is yet enduring the most horrible anguish. Suppose he should commit suicide! There have been instances of wretched men who, in despair at being falsely accused, have killed themselves in their cells. Poor boy! But I will not abandon him. I have ruined him: I will save him! I must, I will, find the culprit; and he shall pay dearly for my mistake, the scoundrel!"



**A**FTER seeing the Comte de Commarin safely in his carriage at the entrance of the Palais de Justice, Noel Gerdy seemed inclined to leave him. Resting one hand against the half-opened carriage door, he bowed respectfully, and said: "When, sir, shall I have the honor of paying my respects to you?"

"Come with me now," said the old nobleman.

The barrister, still leaning forward, muttered some excuses.

He had, he said, important business: he must positively return home at once. "Come," repeated the comte in a tone which admitted of no reply. Noel obeyed. "You have found your father," said M. de Commarin in a low tone; "but I must warn you that at the same time you lose your independence."

The carriage started; and only then did the comte notice that Noel had very modestly seated himself opposite him. This humility seemed to displease him greatly. "Sit here by my side, sir," he exclaimed; "are you not my son?"

The barrister, without replying, took his seat by the side of the terrible old man, but occupied as little room as possible. He had been very much upset by his interview with M. Daburon, for he retained none of his usual assurance, none of that exterior coolness by which he was accustomed to conceal his feelings. Fortunately, the ride gave him time to breathe and to recover himself a little. On the way from the Palais de Justice to the De Commarin mansion not a word passed between the father and son. When the carriage stopped before the steps leading to the principal entrance, and the comte got out with Noel's assistance, there was great commotion among the servants. There were, it is true, few of them present, nearly all having been summoned to the Palais; but the comte and the barrister had scarcely disappeared when, as if by enchantment, they were all assembled in the hall. They came from the garden, the stables, the cellar, and the kitchen. Nearly all bore marks of their calling. A young groom appeared with his wooden shoes filled with straw, shuffling about on the marble floor like a mangy dog on a Gobelin tapestry. One of them recognized Noel as the visitor of the previous Sunday; and that was enough to set fire to all these gossip-mongers thirsting for scandal.

Since morning, moreover, the unusual events at the De Commarin mansion had caused a great stir in society. A thousand stories were circulated, talked over, corrected, and added to by the ill-natured and malicious—some abominably absurd, others simply idiotic. Twenty people, very noble and still more proud, had not been above sending their most intelligent servants to pay a little visit among the comte's retainers, for the sole purpose of learning something positive. As it was, nobody knew anything; and yet everybody pretended to be fully informed. Let any one explain who can this very common phenomenon: A crime is committed; justice arrives, wrapped in

mystery; the police are still ignorant of almost everything; and yet details of the most minute character are already circulated about the streets.

"So," said a cook, "that tall dark fellow with the whiskers is the comte's true son!"—"You are right," said one of the footmen who had accompanied M. de Commarin; "as for the other, he is no more his son than Jean here; who, by the way, will be kicked out of doors if he is caught in this part of the house with his dirty working-shoes on."—"What a romance!" exclaimed Jean, supremely indifferent to the danger which threatened him. "Such things constantly occur in great families," said the cook. "How ever did it happen?"—"Well, you see, one day, long ago, when the comtesse who is now dead was out walking with her little son, who was about six months old, the child was stolen by gipsies. The poor lady was full of grief; but, above all, was greatly afraid of her husband, who was not overkind. What did she do? She purchased a brat from a woman who happened to be passing; and, never having noticed his child, the comte has never known the difference."—"But the assassination!"—"That's very simple. When the woman saw her brat in such a nice berth, she bled him finely, and has kept up a system of blackmailing all along. The vicomte had nothing left for himself. So he resolved at last to put an end to it, and come to a final settling with her."—"And the other, who is up there, the dark fellow?"

The orator would have gone on, without doubt, giving the most satisfactory explanations of everything if he had not been interrupted by the entrance of M. Lubin, who came from the Palais in company of young Joseph. His success, so brilliant up to this time, was cut short, just like that of a second-rate singer when the star of the evening comes on the stage. The entire assembly turned toward Albert's valet, all eyes questioning him. He, of course, knew all; he was the man they wanted. He did not take advantage of his position and keep them waiting.

"What a rascal!" he exclaimed at first. "What a villainous fellow is this Albert!" He entirely did away with the "M." and "Vicomte," and met with general approval for doing so. "However," he added, "I always had my doubts. The fellow didn't please me by half. You see now to what we are exposed every day in our profession, and it is dreadfully disagreeable. The magistrate did not conceal it from me. 'M. Lubin,' said he, 'it is very sad for a man like you to have waited on such

a scoundrel.' For you must know that, besides an old woman over eighty years old, he also assassinated a young girl of twelve. The little child, the magistrate told me, was chopped into bits."

"Ah!" put in Joseph, "he must have been a great fool. Do people do those sort of things themselves when they are rich, and when there are so many poor devils who only ask to gain their living?"

"Pshaw!" said M. Lubin in a knowing tone; "you will see him come out of it as white as snow. These rich men can do anything."

"Anyhow," said the cook, "I'd willingly give a month's wages to be a mouse, and to listen to what the comte and the tall dark fellow are talking about. Suppose some one went up and tried to find out what is going on."

This proposition did not meet with the least favor. The servants knew by experience that, on important occasions, spying was worse than useless. M. de Commarin knew all about servants from infancy. His study was, therefore, a shelter from all indiscretion. The sharpest ear placed at the keyhole could hear nothing of what was going on within, even when the master was in a passion and his voice loudest. One alone, Denis, the comte's valet, had the opportunity of gathering information; but he was well paid to be discreet, and he was so. At this moment M. de Commarin was sitting in the same arm-chair on which the evening before he had bestowed such furious blows while listening to Albert. As soon as he left his carriage, the old nobleman recovered his haughtiness. He became even more arrogant in his manner than he had been humble when before the magistrate, as though he were ashamed of what he now considered an unpardonable weakness. He wondered how he could have yielded to a momentary impulse, how his grief could have so basely betrayed him. At the remembrance of the avowals wrested from him by a sort of delirium, he blushed and reproached himself bitterly. The same as Albert the night before, Noel, having fully recovered himself, stood erect, cold as marble, respectful, but no longer humble. The father and son exchanged glances which had nothing of sympathy or friendliness. They examined one another, they almost measured each other, much as two adversaries feel their way with their eyes before encountering with their weapons.



"Sir," said the comte at length in a harsh voice, "henceforth this house is yours. From this moment you are the Vicomte de Commarin; you regain possession of all the rights of which you were deprived. Listen before you thank me. I wish, at once, to relieve you of all misunderstanding. Remember this well, sir; had I been master of the situation, I would never have recognized you: Albert should have remained in the position in which I placed him."

"I understand you, sir," replied Noel. "I don't think that I could ever bring myself to do an act like that by which you deprived me of my birthright; but I declare that, if I had the misfortune to do so, I should afterward have acted as you have. Your rank was too conspicuous to permit a voluntary acknowledgment. It was a thousand times better to suffer an injustice to continue in secret than to expose the name to the comments of the malicious."

This answer surprised the comte, and very agreeably too. But he would not let his satisfaction be seen, and it was in a still harsher voice that he resumed. "I have no claim, sir, upon your affection; I do not ask for it, but I insist at all times upon the utmost deference. It is traditional in our house that a son shall never interrupt his father when he is speaking; that you have just been guilty of. Neither do children judge their parents: that also you have just done. When I was forty years of age my father was in his second childhood; but I do not remember ever having raised my voice above his. This said, I continue. I provided the necessary funds for the expenses of Albert's household completely, distinct from my own, for he had his own servants, horses, and carriages; and besides that I allowed the unhappy boy four thousand francs a month. I have decided, in order to put a stop to all foolish gossip, and to make your position the easier, that you should live on a grander scale; this matter concerns myself. Further, I will increase your monthly allowance to six thousand francs, which I trust you will spend as nobly as possible, giving the least possible cause for ridicule. I can not too strongly exhort you to the utmost caution. Keep close watch over yourself. Weigh your words well. Study your slightest actions. You will be the point of observation of the thousands of impertinent idlers who compose our world; your blunders will be their delight. Do you fence?"—"Moderately well."—"That will do! Do you ride?"—"No; but in six months I will be a good horse-

man, or break my neck."—"You must become a horseman, and not break anything. Let us proceed. You will, of course, not occupy Albert's apartments. They will be walled off as soon as I am free of the police. Thank heaven! the house is large. You will occupy the other wing; and there will be a separate entrance to your apartments by another staircase. Servants, horses, carriages, furniture, such as become a vicomte, will be at your service, cost what it may, within forty-eight hours. On the day of your taking possession, you must look as though you had been installed there for years. There will be a great scandal, but that can not be avoided. A prudent father might send you away for a few months to the Austrian or Russian courts, but in this instance such prudence would be absurd. Much better a dreadful outcry, which ends quickly, than low murmurs which last forever. Dare public opinion; and in eight days it will have exhausted its comments, and the story will have become old. So to work! This very evening the workmen shall be here; and, in the first place, I must present you to my servants."

To put his purpose into execution, the comte moved to touch the bell-rope. Noel stopped him. Since the commencement of this interview the barrister had wandered in the regions of the thousand and one nights, the wonderful lamp in his hand. The fairy reality cast into the shade his wildest dreams. He was dazzled by the comte's words, and had need of all his reason to struggle against the giddiness which came over him on realizing his great good fortune. Touched by a magic wand, he seemed to awake to a thousand novel and unknown sensations. He rolled in purple and bathed in gold. But he knew how to appear unmoved. His face had contracted the habit of guarding the secret of the most violent internal excitement. While all his passions vibrated within him, he appeared to listen with a sad and almost indifferent coldness. "Permit me, sir," he said to the comte, "without overstepping the bounds of the utmost respect, to say a few words. I am touched more than I can express by your goodness; and yet I beseech you to delay its manifestation. The proposition I am about to suggest may perhaps appear to you worthy of consideration. It seems to me that the situation demands the greatest delicacy on my part. It is well to despise public opinion, but not to defy it. I am certain to be judged with the utmost severity. If I install myself so suddenly in your house, what will be said? I shall

have the appearance of a conqueror, who thinks little, so long as he succeeds, of passing over the body of the conquered. They will reproach me with occupying the bed still warm from Albert's body. They will jest bitterly at my haste in taking possession. They will certainly compare me to Albert, and the comparison will be to my disadvantage, since I should appear to triumph at a time when a great disaster has fallen upon our house." The comte listened without showing any signs of disapprobation, struck perhaps by the justice of these reasons. Noel imagined that his harshness was much more feigned than real; and this idea encouraged him.

"I beseech you then, sir," he continued, "to permit me for the present in no way to change my mode of living. By not showing myself, I leave all malicious remarks to waste themselves in air—I let public opinion the better familiarize itself with the idea of a coming change. There is a great deal in not taking the world by surprise. Being expected, I shall not have the air of an intruder on presenting myself. Absent, I shall have the advantages which the unknown always possess; I shall obtain the good opinion of all those who have envied Albert; and I shall secure as champions all those who would to-morrow assail me if my elevation came suddenly upon them. Besides, by this delay, I shall accustom myself to my abrupt change of fortune. I ought not to bring into your world, which is now mine, the manners of a parvenu. My name ought not to inconvenience me, like a badly fitting coat."

"Perhaps it would be wisest," murmured the comte.

This assent, so easily obtained, surprised Noel. He got the idea that the comte had only wished to prove him, to tempt him. In any case, whether he had triumphed by his eloquence, or whether he had simply shunned a trap, he had succeeded. His confidence increased; he recovered all his former assurance. "I must add, sir," he continued, "that there are a few matters concerning myself which demand my attention. Before entering upon my new life, I must think of those I am leaving behind me. I have friends and clients. This event has surprised me, just as I am beginning to reap the reward of ten years of hard work and perseverance. I have as yet only sown; I am on the point of reaping. My name is already known; I have obtained some little influence. I confess, without shame, that I have heretofore professed ideas and opinions that would not be suited to this house; and it is impossible in the space of a day—"

"Ah!" interrupted the comte in a bantering tone, "you are a liberal. It is a fashionable disease. Albert also was a great liberal."

"My ideas, sir," said Noel quickly, "were those of every intelligent man who wishes to succeed. Besides, have not all parties one and the same aim—power? They merely take different means of reaching it. I will not enlarge upon this subject. Be assured, sir, that I shall know how to bear my name, and think and act as a man of my rank should."

"I trust so," said M. de Commarin; "and I hope that you will never make me regret Albert."

"At least, sir, it will not be my fault. But since you have mentioned the name of that unfortunate young man, let us occupy ourselves about him."

The comte cast a look of distrust upon Noel. "What can now be done for Albert?" he asked.—"What, sir!" cried Noel with ardor, "would you abandon him when he has not a friend left in the world? He is still your son, sir; he is my brother; for thirty years he has borne the name of Commarin. All the members of a family are jointly liable. Innocent, or guilty, he has a right to count upon us; and we owe him our assistance."

"What do you, then, hope for, sir?" asked the comte.

"To save him if he is innocent; and I love to believe that he is. I am a barrister, sir, and I wish to defend him. I have been told that I have some talent; in such a cause I must have. Yes, however strong the charges against him may be, I will overthrow them. I will dispel all doubts. The truth shall burst forth at the sound of my voice. I will find new accents to imbue the judges with my own conviction. I will save him, and this shall be my last cause."

"And if he should confess," said the comte; "if he has already confessed?"

"Then, sir," replied Noel with a dark look, "I will render him the last service, which in such a misfortune I should ask of a brother; I will procure him the means of avoiding judgment."

"That is well spoken, sir," said the comte; "very well, my son!"

And he held out his hand to Noel, who pressed it, bowing a respectful acknowledgment. The barrister took a long breath. At last he had found the way to this haughty noble's heart; he had conquered, he had pleased him.

"Let us return to yourself, sir," continued the comte. "I yield to the reasons which you have suggested. All shall be done as you desire. But do not consider this a precedent. I never change my plans, even though they are proved to be bad and contrary to my interests. But at least nothing prevents your remaining here from to-day and taking your meals with me. We will, first of all, see where you can be lodged until you formally take possession of the apartments which are to be prepared for you."

Noel had the hardihood to again interrupt the old nobleman. "Sir," said he, "when you bade me follow you here, I obeyed you, as was my duty. Now another and a sacred duty calls me away. Madame Gerdy is at this moment dying. Ought I to leave the deathbed of her who filled my mother's place?"

"Valerie!" murmured the comte. He leaned upon the arm of his chair, his face buried in his hands; in one moment the whole past rose up before him. "She has done me great harm," he murmured, as if answering his thoughts. "She has ruined my whole life; but ought I to be implacable? She is dying from the accusation which is hanging over Albert our son. It was I who was the cause of it all. Doubtless, in this last hour, a word from me would be a great consolation to her. I will accompany you, sir."

Noel started at this unexpected proposal. "Oh, sir!" said he hastily, "spare yourself, pray, a heartrending sight. Your going would be useless. Madame Gerdy exists probably still, but her mind is dead. Her brain was unable to resist so violent a shock. The unfortunate woman would neither recognize nor understand you."

"Go then alone," sighed the comte; "go, my son!"

The words "my son," pronounced with a marked emphasis, sounded like a note of victory in Noel's ears. He bowed to take his leave. The comte motioned him to wait. "In any case," he said, "a place at table will be set for you here. I dine at half-past six precisely. I shall be glad to see you." He rang. His valet appeared. "Denis," said he, "none of the orders I may give will affect this gentleman. You will tell this to all the servants. This gentleman is at home here."

The barrister took his leave; and the comte felt great comfort in being once more alone. Since morning events had followed one another with such bewildering rapidity that his thoughts could scarcely keep pace with them. At last he was able to

reflect. "That, then," said he to himself, "is my legitimate son. I am sure of his birth at any rate. Besides I should be foolish to disown him, for I find him the exact picture of myself at thirty. He is a handsome fellow, Noel, very handsome. His features are decidedly in his favor. He is intelligent and acute. He knows how to be humble without lowering himself, and firm without arrogance. His unexpected good fortune does not turn his head. I augur well of a man who knows how to bear himself in prosperity. He thinks well; he will carry his title proudly. And yet I feel no sympathy with him; it seems to me that I shall always regret my poor Albert. I never knew how to appreciate him. Unhappy boy! To commit such a vile crime! He must have lost his reason. I do not like the look of this one's eye. They say that he is perfect. He expresses, at least, the noblest and most appropriate sentiments. He is gentle and strong, magnanimous, generous, heroic. He is without malice, and is ready to sacrifice himself to repay me for what I have done for him. He forgives Madame Gerdy; he loves Albert. It is enough to make one distrust him. But all young men nowadays are so. Ah! we live in a happy age. Our children are born free from all human shortcomings. They have neither the vices, the passions, nor the tempers of their fathers; and these precocious philosophers, models of sagacity and virtue, are incapable of committing the least folly. Alas! Albert, too, was perfect; and he has assassinated Claudine! What will this one do?— All the same," he added, half-aloud, "I ought to have accompanied him to see Valerie!" And, although the barrister had been gone at least a good ten minutes, M. de Commarin, not realizing how the time had passed, hastened to the window, in the hope of seeing Noel in the courtyard and calling him back.

But Noel was already far away. On leaving the house he took a cab in the Rue de Bourgogne, and was quickly driven to the Rue St. Lazare. On reaching his own door he threw rather than gave five francs to the driver, and ran rapidly up the four flights of stairs. "Who has called to see me?" he asked of the servant.—"No one, sir." He seemed relieved from a great anxiety, and continued in a calmer tone: "And the doctor?"—"He came this morning, sir," replied the girl, "while you were out; and he did not seem at all hopeful. He came again just now, and is still here."—"Very well. I will go and speak to him. If any one calls, show them into my study, and let me know."

On entering Madame Gerdy's chamber, Noel saw at a glance that no change for the better had taken place during his absence. With fixed eyes and convulsed features, the sick woman lay extended upon her back. She seemed dead, save for the sudden starts, which shook her at intervals, and disarranged the bedclothes. Above her head was placed a little vessel, filled with ice-water, which fell drop by drop upon her forehead, covered with large bluish spots. The table and mantelpiece were covered with little pots, medicine bottles, and half-emptied glasses. At the foot of the bed a rag stained with blood showed that the doctor had just had recourse to leeches. Near the fireplace, where was blazing a large fire, a nun of the order of St. Vincent de Paul was kneeling, watching a saucepan. She was a young woman, with a face whiter than her cap. Her immovably placid features, her mournful look, betokened the renunciation of the flesh, and the abdication of all independence of thought. Her heavy gray costume hung about her in large ungraceful folds. Every time she moved, her long chaplet of beads and colored box-wood, loaded with crosses and copper medals, shook and trailed along the floor with a noise like a jingling of chains.

Dr. Herve was seated on a chair opposite the bed, watching, apparently with close attention, the nun's preparations. He jumped up as Noel entered. "At last you are here," he said, giving his friend a strong grasp of the hand.

"I was detained at the Palais," said the barrister, as if he felt the necessity of explaining his absence; "and I have been, as you may well imagine, dreadfully anxious." He leaned toward the doctor's ear, and in a trembling voice asked: "Well, is she at all better?"

The doctor shook his head with an air of deep discouragement. "She is much worse," he replied: "since morning bad symptoms have succeeded each other with frightful rapidity." He checked himself. The barrister had seized his arm and was pressing it with all his might. Madame Gerdy stirred a little, and a feeble groan escaped her. "She heard you," murmured Noel.—"I wish it were so," said the doctor; "it would be most encouraging. But I fear you are mistaken. However, we will see. He went up to Madame Gerdy, and, while feeling her pulse, examined her carefully; then, with the tip of his finger, he lightly raised her eyelid. The eye appeared dull, glassy, lifeless. "Come, judge for yourself; take her hand,

“speak to her.” Noel, trembling all over, did as his friend wished. He drew near, and, leaning over the bed, so that his mouth almost touched the sick woman’s ear, he murmured: “Mother, it is I, Noel, your own Noel. Speak to me, make some sign; do you hear me, mother?” It was in vain; she retained her frightful immobility. Not a sign of intelligence crossed her features. “You see,” said the doctor, “I told you the truth.”—“Poor woman!” sighed Noel, “does she suffer?”—“Not at present.” The nun now rose; and she too came beside the bed. “Doctor,” said she, “all is ready.”

“Then call the servant, sister, to help us. We are going to apply a mustard poultice.” The servant hastened in. In the arms of the two women, Madame Gerdy was like a corpse whom they were dressing for the last time. She was as rigid as though she were dead. She must have suffered much and long, poor woman, for it was pitiable to see how thin she was. The nun herself was affected, although she had become habituated to the sight of suffering. How many invalids had breathed their last in her arms during the fifteen years that she had gone from pillow to pillow! Noel, during this time, had retired into the window recess, and pressed his burning brow against the panes. Of what was he thinking while she who had given him so many proofs of maternal tenderness and devotion was dying a few paces from him? Did he regret her? Was he not thinking rather of the grand and magnificent existence which awaited him on the other side of the river, at the Faubourg St. Germain? He turned abruptly round on hearing his friend’s voice.

“It is done,” said the doctor; “we have only now to wait the effect of the mustard. If she feels it, it will be a good sign; if it has no effect, we will try cupping.”—“And if that does not succeed?” The doctor answered only with a shrug of the shoulders, which showed his inability to do more. “I understand your silence, Herve,” murmured Noel. “Alas! you told me last night she was lost.”

“Scientifically, yes; but I do not yet despair. It is hardly a year ago that the father-in-law of one of our comrades recovered from an almost identical attack; and I saw him when he was much worse than this: suppuration had set in.”

“It breaks my heart to see her in this state,” resumed Noel. “Must she die without recovering her reason even for one moment? Will she not recognize me, speak one word to me?”

“Who knows? This disease, my poor friend, baffles all fore-



sight. Each moment the aspect may change, according as the inflammation affects such or such a part of the brain. She is now in a state of utter insensibility, of complete prostration of all her intellectual faculties, of coma, of paralysis, so to say; to-morrow she may be seized with convulsions, accompanied with a fierce delirium."—"And will she speak then?"—"Certainly; but that will neither modify the nature nor the gravity of the disease."—"And will she recover her reason?"—"Perhaps," answered the doctor, looking fixedly at his friend; "but why do you ask that?"

"Ah, my dear Herve, one word from Madame Gerdy, only one, would be of such use to me!"

"For your affair, eh! Well, I can tell you nothing, can promise you nothing. You have as many chances in your favor as against you; only do not leave her. If her intelligence returns, it will be only momentary; try and profit by it. But I must go," added the doctor: "I have still three calls to make."—Noel followed his friend. When they reached the landing, he asked: "You will return?"

"This evening, at nine. There will be no need of me till then. All depends upon the watcher. But I have chosen a pearl. I know her well."—"It was you, then, who brought this nun?"—"Yes, and without your permission. Are you displeased?"—"Not the least in the world. Only I confess."—"What! you make a grimace. Do your political opinions forbid your having your mother, I should say Madame Gerdy, nursed by a nun of St. Vincent?"—"My dear Herve, you."—"Ah! I know what you are going to say. They are adroit, insinuating, dangerous; all that is quite true. If I had a rich old uncle whose heir I expected to be, I shouldn't introduce one of them into his house. These good creatures are sometimes charged with strange commissions. But what have you to fear from this one? Never mind what fools say. Money aside, these worthy sisters are the best nurses in the world. I hope you will have one when your end comes. But good-by; I am in a hurry." And, regardless of his professional dignity, the doctor hurried down the stairs; while Noel, full of thought, his countenance displaying the greatest anxiety, returned to Madame Gerdy. At the door of the sick-room the nun awaited the barrister's return. "Sir," said she, "sir."

"You want something of me, sister?"

"Sir, the servant bade me come to you for money; she has no more, and had to get credit at the chemist's."

"Excuse me, sister," interrupted Noel, seemingly very much vexed; "excuse me for not having anticipated your request; but you see I am rather confused." And, taking a hundred-franc note out of his pocket-book, he laid it on the mantel-piece. "Thanks, sir," said the nun; "I will keep an account of what I spend. We always do that," she added; "it is more convenient for the family. One is so troubled at seeing those one loves laid low by illness. You have perhaps not thought of giving this poor lady the sweet aid of our holy religion! In your place, sir, I should send without delay for a priest—"

"What now, sister? Do you not see the condition she is in? She is the same as dead; you saw that she did not hear my voice."

"That is of little consequence, sir," replied the nun; "you will always have done your duty. She did not answer you; but are you sure that she will not answer the priest? Ah, you do not know all the power of the last sacraments! I have seen the dying recover their intelligence and sufficient strength to confess, and to receive the sacred body of our Lord Jesus Christ. I have often heard families say that they do not wish to alarm the invalid, that the sight of the minister of our Lord might inspire a terror that would hasten the final end. It is a fatal error. The priest does not terrify; he reassures the soul, at the beginning of its long journey. He speaks in the name of the God of mercy, who comes to save, not to destroy. I could cite to you many cases of dying people who have been cured simply by contact with the sacred balm."

The nun spoke in a tone as mournful as her look. Her heart was evidently not in the words which she uttered. Without doubt, she had learned them when she first entered the convent. Then they expressed something she really felt, she spoke her own thoughts; but, since then, she had repeated the words over and over again to the friends of every sick person that she attended, until they lost all meaning so far as she was concerned. To utter them became simply a part of her duties as nurse, the same as the preparation of drafts, and the making of poultices. Noel was not listening to her; his thoughts were far away.

"Your dear mother," continued the nun, "this good lady that you love so much, no doubt trusted in her religion. Do you wish to endanger her salvation? If she could speak in the midst of her cruel sufferings—"

The barrister was about to reply, when the servant announced that a gentleman, who would not give his name, wished to speak with him on business. "I will come," he said.

"What do you decide, sir?" persisted the nun.—"I leave you free, sister, to do as you may judge best."

The worthy woman began to recite her lesson of thanks, but to no purpose. Noel had disappeared with a displeased look; and almost immediately she heard his voice in the next room saying: "At last you have come, M. Clergot, I had almost given you up!"

The visitor, whom the barrister had been expecting, is a person well known in the Rue St. Lazare, round about the Rue de Provence, the neighborhood of Notre Dame de Lorette, and all along the exterior Boulevards, from the Chaussee des Martyrs to the Rond-Point of the old Barriere de Clichy. M. Clergot is no more a usurer than M. Jourdain's father was a shopkeeper. Only, as he has lots of money, and is very obliging, he lends it to his friends; and, in return for this kindness, he consents to receive interest, which varies from fifteen to five hundred per cent. The excellent man positively loves his clients, and his honesty is generally appreciated. He has never been known to seize a debtor's goods; he prefers to follow him up without respite for ten years, and tear from him bit by bit what is his due. He lives near the top of the Rue de la Victoire. He has no shop, and yet he sells everything salable, and some other things, too, that the law scarcely considers merchandise. Anything to be useful or neighborly. He often asserts that he is not very rich. It is possibly true. He is whimsical more than covetous, and fearfully bold. Free with his money when one pleases him, he would not lend five francs, even with a mortgage on the Chateau of Ferrieres as guarantee, to whosoever does not meet with his approval. However, he often risks his all on the most unlucky cards. His preferred customers consist of women of doubtful morality, actresses, artists, and those venturesome fellows who enter upon professions which depend solely upon those who practise them, such as lawyers and doctors. He lends to women upon their present beauty, to men upon their future talent. Slight pledges! His discernment, it should be said, however, enjoys a great reputation. It is rarely at fault. A pretty girl furnished by Clergot is sure to go far. For an artist to be in Clergot's debt was a recommendation preferable to the warmest criticism.

Madame Juliette had procured this useful and honorable acquaintance for her lover. Noel, who well knew how sensitive this worthy man was to kind attentions, and how pleased by politeness, began by offering him a seat, and asking after his health. Clergot went into details. His teeth were still good; but his sight was beginning to fail. His legs were no longer so steady, and his hearing was not all that could be desired. The chapter of complaints ended—"You know," said he, "why I have called. Your bills fall due to-day; and I am devilishly in need of money. I have one of ten, one of seven, and a third of five thousand francs, total twenty-two thousand francs."

"Come, M. Clergot," replied Noel, "do not let us have any joking."

"Excuse me," said the usurer; "I am not joking at all."

"I rather think you are though. Why, it's just eight days ago to-day that I wrote to tell you that I was not prepared to meet the bills, and asked for a renewal!"

"I recollect very well receiving your letter."

"What do you say to it, then?"

"By my not answering the note, I supposed that you would understand that I could not comply with your request; I hoped that you would exert yourself to find the amount for me."

Noel allowed a gesture of impatience to escape him. "I have not done so," he said, "so take your own course. I haven't a sou."

"The devil. Do you know that I have renewed these bills four times already?"

"I know that the interest has been fully and promptly paid, and at a rate which can not make you regret the investment." Clergot never likes talking about the interest he receives. He pretends that it is humiliating. "I do not complain; I only say that you take things too easy with me. If I had put your signature in circulation all would have been paid by now."

"Not at all."

"Yes, you would have found means to escape being sued. But you say to yourself: 'Old Clergot is a good fellow.' And that is true. But I am so only when it can do me no harm. Now, to-day, I am absolutely in great need of my money. Ab—so—lute—ly," he added, emphasizing each syllable. The old fellow's decided tone seemed to disturb the barrister.—"Must I repeat it?" Noel said; "I am completely drained, com—plete—ly!"

"Indeed?" said the usurer; "well, I am sorry for you; but I shall have to sue you."

"And what good will that do? Let us play aboveboard, M. Clergot. Do you care to increase the lawyers' fees? You don't, do you? Even though you may put me to great expense, will that procure you even a centime? You will obtain judgment against me. Well, what then? Do you think of putting in an execution? This is not my home; the lease is in Madame Gerdy's name."

"I know all that. Besides, the sale of everything here would not cover the amount."

"Then you intend to put me in prison, at Clichy! Bad speculation, I warn you; my practise will be lost, and, you know, no practise, no money."

"Good!" cried the worthy money-lender. "Now you are talking nonsense! You call that being frank. Pshaw! If you suppose me capable of half the cruel things you have said, my money would be there in your drawer, ready for me."

"A mistake! I should not know where to get it, unless by asking Madame Gerdy, a thing I would never do."

A sarcastic and most irritating little laugh, peculiar to old Clergot, interrupted Noel. "It would be no good doing that," said the usurer; "mama's purse has long been empty; and if the dear creature should die now—they tell me she is very ill—I would not give two hundred napoleons for the inheritance." The barrister turned red with passion, his eyes glittered; but he dissembled, and protested with some spirit. "We know what we know," continued Clergot quietly. "Before a man risks his money, he takes care to make some inquiries. Mama's remaining bonds were sold last October. Ah! the Rue de Provence is an expensive place! I have made an estimate, which is at home. Juliette is a charming woman, to be sure; she has not her equal, I am convinced; but she is expensive, devilish expensive." Noel was enraged at hearing his Juliette thus spoken of by this honorable personage. But what reply could he make? Besides, none of us are perfect; and M. Clergot possesses the fault of not properly appreciating women, which doubtless arises from the business transactions he has had with them. He is charming in his business with the fair sex, complimenting and flattering them; but the coarsest insults would be less revolting than his disgusting familiarity.

"You have gone too fast," he continued, without deigning to

notice his client's ill looks; "and I have told you so before. But, you would not listen; you are mad about the girl. You can never refuse her anything. Fool! When a pretty girl wants anything, you should let her long for it for a while; she has then something to occupy her mind and keep her from thinking of a quantity of other follies. Four good strong wishes, well managed, ought to last a year. You don't know how to look after your own interests. I know that her glance would turn the head of a stone saint; but you should reason with yourself, hang it! Why, there are not ten girls in Paris who live in such style! And do you think she loves you any the more for it? Not a bit. When she has ruined you, she'll leave you in the lurch." Noel accepted the eloquence of his prudent banker as a man without an umbrella accepts a shower. "What is the meaning of all this?" he asked.—"Simply that I will not renew your bills. You understand? Just now, if you try very hard, you will be able to hand me the twenty-two thousand francs in question. You need not frown; you will find means to do so to prevent my seizing your goods—not here, for that would be absurd, but at your little woman's apartments. She would not be at all pleased, and would not hesitate to tell you so."

"But everything there belongs to her; and you have no right—"

"What of that? She will oppose the seizure, no doubt, and I expect her to do so; but she will make you find the requisite sum. Believe me, you had best parry the blow. I insist on being paid now. I won't give you any further delay; because, in three months' time, you will have used your last resources. It is no use saying 'No,' like that. You are in one of those conditions that must be continued at any price. You would burn the wood from your dying mother's bed to warm this creature's feet. Where did you obtain the ten thousand francs that you left with her the other evening? Who knows what you will next attempt to procure money? The idea of keeping her fifteen days, three days, a single day more, may lead you far. Open your eyes. I know the game well. If you do not leave Juliette, you are lost. Listen to a little good advice, gratis. You must give her up, sooner or later, musn't you? Do it to-day, then."

As you see, our worthy Clergot never minces the truth to his customers, when they do not keep their engagements.

If they are displeased, so much the worse for them! His conscience is at rest. He would never join in any foolish business. Noel could bear it no longer; and his anger burst forth. "Enough," he cried decidedly. "Do as you please, M. Clergot, but have done with your advice. I prefer the lawyer's plain prose. If I have committed follies, I can repair them, and in a way that would surprise you. Yes, M. Clergot, I can procure twenty-two thousand francs; I could have a hundred thousand to-morrow morning, if I saw fit. They would only cost me the trouble of asking for them. But that I will not do. My extravagance, with all due deference to you, will remain a secret as heretofore. I do not choose that my present embarrassed circumstances should be even suspected. I will not relinquish, for your sake, that at which I have been aiming, the very day it is within my grasp."

"He resists," thought the usurer; "he is less deeply involved than I imagined."

"So," continued the barrister, "put your bills in the hands of your lawyer. Let him sue me. In eight days I shall be summoned to appear before the Tribunal de Commerce, and I shall ask for the twenty-five days' delay, which the judges always grant to an embarrassed debtor. Twenty-five and eight, all the world over, make just thirty-three days. That is precisely the respite I need. You have two alternatives: either accept from me at once a new bill for twenty-four thousand francs, payable in six weeks, or else, as I have an appointment, go off to your lawyer."

"And in six weeks," replied the usurer, "you will be in precisely the same condition you are to-day. And forty-five days more of Juliette will cost—"

"M. Clergot," interrupted Noel, "long before that time my position will be completely changed. But I have finished," he added, rising, "and my time is valuable."

"One moment, you impatient fellow!" exclaimed the banker, "you said twenty-four thousand francs at forty-five days?"

"Yes. That is about seventy-five per cent—pretty fair interest."

"I never cavil about interest," said M. Clergot; "only—" He looked slyly at Noel, scratching his chin violently, a movement which in him indicated how insensibly his brain was at work. "Only," he continued, "I should very much like to know what you are counting upon."

"That I will not tell you. You will know it ere long, in common with all the world."

"I have it!" cried M. Clergot, "I have it! You are going to marry! You have found an heiress, of course; your little Juliette told me something of the sort this morning. Ah! you are going to marry! Is she pretty? But no matter. She has a full purse, eh? You wouldn't take her without that. So you are going to start a home of your own?"

"I did not say so."

"That's right. Be discreet. But I can take a hint. One word more. Beware of the storm; your little woman has a suspicion of the truth. You are right; it wouldn't do to be seeking money now. The slightest inquiry would be sufficient to enlighten your father-in-law as to your financial position, and you would lose the damsel. Marry and settle down. But get rid of Juliette, or I won't give five francs for the fortune. So it is settled: prepare a new bill for twenty-four thousand francs, and I will call for it when I bring you the old ones on Monday."

"You haven't them with you, then?"

"No. And to be frank, I confess that, knowing well I should get nothing from you, I left them with others at my lawyer's. However, you may rest easy: you have my word."

M. Clergot made a pretense of retiring; but just as he was going out, he returned quickly. "I had almost forgotten," said he; "while you are about it, you can make the bill for twenty-six thousand francs. Your little woman ordered some dresses, which I shall deliver to-morrow; in this way they will be paid for." The barrister began to remonstrate. He certainly did not refuse to pay, only he thought he ought to be consulted when any purchases were made. He didn't like this way of disposing of his money.

"What a fellow!" said the usurer, shrugging his shoulders; "do you want to make the girl unhappy for nothing at all? She won't let you off yet, my friend. You may be quite sure she will eat up your new fortune also. And you know, if you need any money for the wedding, you have but to give me some guarantee. Procure me an introduction to the notary, and everything shall be arranged. But I must go. On Monday then."

Noel listened, to make sure that the usurer had actually gone. When he heard him descending the staircase, "Scoundrel!" he



cried, "miserable thieving old skinflint! Didn't he need a lot of persuading? He had quite made up his mind to sue me. It would have been a pleasant thing had the comte come to hear of it. Vile usurer! I was afraid one moment of being obliged to tell him all."

While inveighing thus against the money-lender, the barrister looked at his watch. "Half-past five already," he said. His indecision was great. Ought he to go and dine with his father? Could he leave Madame Gerdy? He longed to dine at the De Commarin mansion; yet, on the other hand, to leave a dying woman! "Decidedly," he murmured, "I can't go." He sat down at his desk, and with all haste wrote a letter of apology to his father. Madame Gerdy, he said, might die at any moment; he must remain with her. As he bade the servant give the note to a messenger, to carry it to the comte, a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Does madame's brother," he asked, "know that she is dangerously ill?"

"I do not know, sir," replied the servant, "at any rate, I have not informed him."

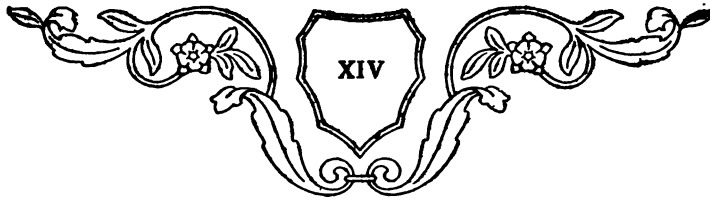
"What, did you not think to send him word? Run to his house quickly. Have him sought for, if he is not at home; he must come." Considerably more at ease, Noel went and sat in the sick-room. The lamp was lighted; and the nun was moving about the room as though quite at home, dusting and arranging everything, and putting it in its place. She wore an air of satisfaction that Noel did not fail to notice. "Have we any gleam of hope, sister?" he asked.

"Perhaps," replied the nun. "The priest has been here, sir; your dear mother did not notice his presence; but he is coming back. That is not all. Since the priest was here, the poultice has taken admirably. The skin is quite reddened. I am sure she feels it."

"God grant that she does, sister!"

"Oh, I have already been praying! But it is important not to leave her alone a minute. I have arranged all with the servant. After the doctor has been here, I shall lie down, and she will watch until one in the morning. I will then take her place and—"

"You shall go to bed, sister," interrupted Noel, sadly. "It is I, who could not sleep a wink, who will watch through the night."



OLD TABARET did not consider himself defeated, because he had been repulsed by the investigating magistrate, already irritated by a long day's examination. You may call it a fault, or an accomplishment; but the old man was more obstinate than a mule. To the excess of despair to which he succumbed in the passage outside the magistrate's office, there soon succeeded that firm resolution which is the enthusiasm called forth by danger. The feeling of duty got the upper hand. Was it a time to yield to unworthy despair, when the life of a fellow man depended on each minute? Inaction would be unpardonable. He had plunged an innocent man into the abyss; and he must draw him out, he alone, if no one would help him. Old Tabaret, as well as the magistrate, was greatly fatigued. On reaching the open air, he perceived that he, too, was in want of food. The emotions of the day had prevented him from feeling hungry; and, since the previous evening, he had not even taken a glass of water. He entered a restaurant on the Boulevard, and ordered dinner. While eating, not only his courage, but also his confidence, came insensibly back to him. It was with him, as with the rest of mankind; who knows how much one's ideas may change, from the beginning to the end of a repast, be it ever so modest! A philosopher has plainly demonstrated that heroism is but an affair of the stomach. The old fellow looked at the situation in a much less sombre light. He had plenty of time before him! A clever man could accomplish a great deal in a month! Would his usual penetration fail him now? Certainly not. His great regret was his inability to let Albert know that some one was working for him.

He was entirely another man as he rose from the table; and it was with a sprightly step that he walked toward the Rue St. Lazare. Nine o'clock struck as the concierge opened the door for him. He went at once up to the fourth floor to inquire after the health of his former friend, her whom he used to call the excellent, the worthy Madame Gerdy. It was Noel who let

him in, Noel, who had doubtless been thinking of the past, for he looked as sad as though the dying woman were really his mother. In consequence of this unexpected circumstance, old Tabaret could not avoid going in for a few minutes, though he would much have preferred not doing so. He knew very well that, being with the barrister, he would be unavoidably led to speak of the Lerouge case; and how could he do this, knowing, as he did, the particulars much better than his young friend himself, without betraying his secret? A single imprudent word might reveal the part he was playing in this sad drama. It was, above all others, from his dear Noel, now Vicomte de Commarin, that he wished entirely to conceal his connection with the police. But, on the other hand, he thirsted to know what had passed between the barrister and the comte. His ignorance on this single point aroused his curiosity. However, as he could not withdraw, he resolved to keep close watch upon his language and remain constantly on his guard. The barrister ushered the old man into Madame Gerdy's room. Her condition, since the afternoon, had changed a little; though it was impossible to say whether for the better or the worse. One thing was evident, her prostration was not so great. Her eyes still remained closed; but a slight quivering of the lids was evident. She constantly moved on her pillow, and moaned feebly.

"What does the doctor say?" asked old Tabaret, in that low voice one unconsciously employs in a sick-room.

"He has just gone," replied Noel; "before long all will be over." The old man advanced on tiptoe, and looked at the dying woman with evident emotion. "Poor creature!" he murmured; "God is merciful in taking her. She perhaps suffers much; but what is this pain compared to what she would feel if she knew that her son, her true son, was in prison, accused of murder?"

"That is what I keep thinking," said Noel, "to console myself for this sight. For I still love her, my old friend; I shall always regard her as a mother. You have heard me curse her, have you not? I have twice treated her very harshly. I thought I hated her; but now, at the moment of losing her, I forget every wrong she has done me, only to remember her tenderness. Yes, for her, death is far preferable! And yet I do not think, no, I can not think her son guilty."

"No! what, you too?" Old Tabaret put so much warmth and vivacity into this exclamation that Noel looked at him with

astonishment. He felt his face grow red, and he hastened to explain himself. "I said, 'You too,'" he continued, "because I, thanks perhaps to my inexperience, am persuaded also of this young man's innocence. I can not in the least imagine a man of his rank meditating and accomplishing so cowardly a crime. I have spoken with many persons on this matter which has made so much noise; and everybody is of my opinion. He has public opinion in his favor; that is already something."

Seated near the bed, sufficiently far from the lamp to be in the shade, the nun hastily knitted stockings destined for the poor. It was a purely mechanical work, during which she usually prayed. But, since old Tabaret entered the room, she forgot her everlasting prayers while listening to the conversation. What did it all mean? Who could this woman be? And this young man who was not her son, and who yet called her mother, and at the same time spoke of a true son accused of being an assassin? Before this she had overheard mysterious remarks pass between Noel and the doctor. Into what strange house had she entered? She was a little afraid; and her conscience was sorely troubled. Was she not sinning? She resolved to tell all to the priest, when he returned.

"No," said Noel, "no, M. Tabaret; Albert has not public opinion for him. We are sharper than that in France, as you know. When a poor devil is arrested, entirely innocent, perhaps, of a crime charged against him, we are always ready to throw stones at him. We keep all our pity for him, who, without doubt guilty, appears before the court of assize. As long as justice hesitates, we side with the prosecution against the prisoner. The moment it is proved that the man is a villain, all our sympathies are in his favor. That is public opinion. You understand, however, that it affects me but little. I despise it to such an extent that if, as I dare still hope, Albert is not released, I will defend him. Yes, I have told the Comte de Commarin, my father, as much. I will be his counsel, and I will save him."

Gladly would the old man have thrown himself on Noel's neck. He longed to say to him: "We will save him together." But he restrained himself. Would not the barrister despise him, if he told him his secret! He resolved, however, to reveal all should it become necessary, or should Albert's position become worse. For the time being, he contended himself with strongly approving his young friend. "Bravo! my boy," said

he; "you have a noble heart. I feared to see you spoiled by wealth and rank; pardon me. You will remain, I see, what you have always been in your more humble position. But, tell me, you have, then, seen your father, the comte?"

Now, for the first time, Noel seemed to notice the nun's eyes, which, lighted by eager curiosity, glittered in the shadow like carbuncles. With a look, he drew the old man's attention to her, and said: "I have seen him; and everything is arranged to my satisfaction. I will tell you all, in detail, by and by, when we are more at ease. By this bedside, I am almost ashamed of my happiness."

M. Tabaret was obliged to content himself with this reply and this promise. Seeing that he would learn nothing that evening, he spoke of going to bed, declaring himself tired out by what he had had to do during the day. Noel did not ask him to stop. He was expecting, he said, Madame Gerdy's brother, who had been sent for several times, but who was not at home. He hardly knew how he could again meet this brother, he added: he did not yet know what conduct he ought to pursue. Should he tell him all? It would only increase his grief. On the other hand, silence would oblige him to play a difficult part. The old man advised him to say nothing; he could explain all later on. "What a fine fellow Noel is!" murmured old Tabaret, as he regained his apartments as quietly as possible. He had been absent from home twenty-four hours; and he fully expected a formidable scene with his housekeeper. Manette was decidedly out of temper, and declared, once for all, that she would certainly seek a new place, if her master did not change his conduct. She had remained up all night, in a terrible fright, listening to the least sound on the stairs, expecting every moment to see her master brought home on a litter, assassinated. As though on purpose, there had been great commotion in the house. M. Gerdy had gone down a short time after her master, and she had seen him return two hours later. After that, they had sent for the doctor. Such goings on would be the death of her, without counting that her constitution was too weak to allow her to sit up so late. But Manette forgot that she did not sit up on her master's account nor on Noel's, but was expecting one of her old friends, one of those handsome Gardés de Paris who had promised to marry her, and for whom she had waited in vain, the rascal! She burst forth in reproaches, while she prepared her master's

bed, too sincere, she declared, to keep anything on her mind, or to keep her mouth closed, when it was a question of his health and reputation. M. Tabaret made no reply, not being in the mood for argument. He bent his head to the storm, and turned his back to the hail. But, as soon as Manette had finished what she was about, he put her out of the room, and double locked the door. He busied himself in forming a new line of battle, and in deciding upon prompt and active measures. He rapidly examined the situation. Had he been deceived in his investigations? No. Were his calculations of probabilities erroneous? No. He had started with a positive fact, the murder. He had discovered the particulars; his inferences were correct, and the criminal was evidently such as he had described him. The man M. Daburon had had arrested could not be the criminal. His confidence in a judicial axiom had led him astray, when he pointed to Albert.

"That," thought he, "is the result of following accepted opinions and those absurd phrases, all ready to hand, which are like milestones along a fool's road! Left free to my own inspirations, I should have examined this case more thoroughly, I would have left nothing to chance. The formula, 'Seek out the one whom the crime benefits,' may often be as absurd as true. The heirs of a man assassinated are in reality all benefited by the murder; while the assassin obtains at most the victim's watch and purse. Three persons were interested in Widow Lerouge's death: Albert, Madame Gerdy, and the Comte de Commarin. It is plain to me that Albert is not the criminal. It is not Madame Gerdy, who is dying from the shock caused by the unexpected announcement of the crime. There remains, then, the comte. Can it be he? If so, he certainly did not do it himself. He must have hired some wretch, a wretch of good position, if you please, wearing patent-leather boots of a good make, and smoking trabucos cigars with an amber mouthpiece. These well-dressed villains ordinarily lack nerve. They cheat, they forge; but they don't assassinate. Supposing, though, that the comte did get hold of some dare-devil fellow. He would simply have replaced one accomplice by another still more dangerous. That would be idiotic, and the comte is a sensible man. He, therefore, had nothing whatever to do with the matter. To be quite sure though, I will make some inquiries about him. Another thing, Widow Lerouge, who so readily exchanged the children while nursing them, would be very likely to undertake

a number of other dangerous commissions. Who can say that she has not obliged other persons who had an equal interest in getting rid of her? There is a secret, I am getting at it, but I do not hold it yet. One thing is certain though, she was not assassinated to prevent Noel recovering his rights. She must have been suppressed for some analogous reason, by a bold and experienced scoundrel, prompted by similar motives to those of which I suspected Albert. It is, then, in that direction that I must follow up the case now. And, above all, I must obtain the past history of this obliging widow, and I will have it too, for in all probability the particulars which have been written for from her birthplace will arrive to-morrow."

Returning to Albert, old Tabaret weighed the charges which were brought against the young man, and reckoned the chances which he still had in favor of his release. "From the look of things," he murmured, "I see only luck and myself, that is to say, absolutely nothing, in his favor at present. As to the charges, they are countless. However, it is no use going over them. It is I who amassed them; and I know what they are worth! At once everything and nothing. What do signs prove, however striking they may be, in cases where one ought to disbelieve even the evidence of one's own senses? Albert is a victim of the most remarkable coincidences; but one word might explain them. There have been many such cases. It was even worse in the matter of the little tailor. At five o'clock, he bought a knife, which he showed to ten of his friends, saying: 'This is for my wife, who is an idle jade, and plays me false with my workmen.' In the evening, the neighbors heard a terrible quarrel between the couple, cries, threats, stampings, blows; then suddenly all was quiet. The next day, the tailor had disappeared from his home, and the wife was discovered dead, with the very same knife buried to the hilt between her shoulders. Ah, well! it turned out it was not the husband who had stuck it there; it was a jealous lover. After that, what is to be believed? Albert, it is true, will not give an account of how he passed Tuesday evening. That does not affect me. The question for me is not to prove where he was, but that he was not at La Jonchere. Perhaps, after all, Gevrol is on the right track. I hope so, from the bottom of my heart. Yes; God grant that he may be successful. My vanity and my mad presumption will deserve the slight punishment of his triumph over me. What would I not give to establish this man's inno-

cence? Half of my fortune would be but a small sacrifice. If I should not succeed! If, after having caused the evil, I should find myself powerless to undo it!"

Old Tabaret went to bed, shuddering at this last thought. He fell asleep, and had a terrible nightmare. Lost in that vulgar crowd, which, on the days when society revenges itself, presses about the Place de la Roquette and watches the last convulsions of one condemned to death, he attended Albert's execution. He saw the unhappy man, his hands bound behind his back, his collar turned down, ascend, supported by a priest, the steep flight of steps leading on to the scaffold. He saw him standing upon the fatal platform, turning his proud gaze upon the terrified assembly beneath him. Soon the eyes of the condemned man met his own; and, bursting his cords, he pointed him, Tabaret, out to the crowd, crying, in a loud voice: "That man is my assassin." Then a great clamor arose to curse the detective. He wished to escape; but his feet seemed fixed to the ground. He tried at least to close his eyes; he could not. A power unknown and irresistible compelled him to look. Then Albert again cried out: "I am innocent; the guilty one is—" He pronounced a name; the crowd repeated this name, and he alone did not catch what it was. At last the head of the condemned man fell. M. Tabaret uttered a loud cry, and awoke in a cold perspiration. It took him some time to convince himself that nothing was real of what he had just heard and seen, and that he was actually in his own house, in his own bed. It was only a dream! But dreams sometimes are, they say, warnings from heaven. His imagination was so struck with what had just happened that he made unheard-of efforts to recall the name pronounced by Albert. Not succeeding, he got up and lighted his candle. The darkness made him afraid, the night was full of phantoms. It was no longer with him a question of sleep. Beset with these anxieties, he accused himself most severely, and harshly reproached himself for the occupation he had until then so delighted in. Poor humanity! He was evidently stark mad the day when he first had the idea of seeking employment in the Rue de Jerusalem. A noble hobby, truly, for a man of his age, a good quiet citizen of Paris, rich, and esteemed by all! And to think that he had been proud of his exploits, that he had boasted of his cunning, that he had plumed himself on his keenness of scent, that he had been flattered by that ridiculous sobriquet, "Tiraclair." Old fool!



What could he hope to gain from that bloodhound calling? All sorts of annoyance, the contempt of the world, without counting the danger of contributing to the conviction of an innocent man. Why had he not taken warning by the little tailor's case? Recalling his few satisfactions of the past, and comparing them with his present anguish, he resolved that he would have no more to do with it. Albert once saved, he would seek some less dangerous amusement, and one more generally appreciated. He would break the connection of which he was ashamed, and the police and justice might get on the best they could without him.

At last the day, which he had awaited with feverish impatience, dawned. To pass the time, he dressed himself slowly, with much care, trying to occupy his mind with needless details, and to deceive himself as to the time by looking constantly at the clock, to see if it had not stopped. In spite of all this delay, it was not eight o'clock when he presented himself at the magistrate's house, begging him to excuse, on account of the importance of his business, a visit too early not to be indiscreet. Excuses were superfluous. M. Daburon was never disturbed by a call at eight o'clock in the morning. He was already at work. He received the old amateur detective with his usual kindness, and even joked with him a little about his excitement of the previous evening. Who would have thought his nerves were so sensitive? Doubtless the night had brought deliberation. Had he recovered his reason? or had he put his hand on the true criminal?

This trifling tone in a magistrate, who was accused of being grave even to a fault, troubled the old man. Did not this quizzing hide a determination not to be influenced by anything that he could say? He believed it did; and it was without the least deception that he commenced his pleading. He put the case more calmly this time, but with all the energy of a well-digested conviction. He had appealed to the heart, he now appealed to reason; but, although doubt is essentially contagious, he neither succeeded in convincing the magistrate, nor in shaking his opinion. His strongest arguments were of no more avail against M. Daburon's absolute conviction than bullets made of bread crumbs would be against a breastplate. And there was nothing very surprising in that. Old Tabaret had on his side only a subtle theory, mere words; M. Daburon possessed palpable testimony, facts. And such was the peculiarity of the case that all the reasons brought forward by the old man to justify Albert

simply reacted against him, and confirmed his guilt. A repulse at the magistrate's hands had entered too much into M. Tabaret's anticipations for him to appear troubled or discouraged. He declared that, for the present, he would insist no more; he had full confidence in the magistrate's wisdom and impartiality. All he wished was to put him on his guard against the presumptions which he himself unfortunately had taken such pains to inspire. He was going, he added, to busy himself with obtaining more information. They were only at the beginning of the investigation; and they were still ignorant of very many things, even of Widow Lerouge's past life. More facts might come to light. Who knew what testimony the man with the earrings, who was being pursued by Gevrol, might give? Though in a great rage internally, and longing to insult and chastise him whom he inwardly styled a "fool of a magistrate," old Tabaret forced himself to be humble and polite. He wished, he said, to keep well posted up in the different phases of the investigation, and to be informed of the result of future interrogations. He ended by asking permission to communicate with Albert. He thought his services deserved this slight favor. He desired an interview of only ten minutes without witnesses. M. Daburon refused this request. "Your refusal is cruel, sir," said M. Tabaret; "but I understand it, and submit." That was his only complaint; and he withdrew almost immediately, fearing that he could no longer master his indignation. "Three or four days," he muttered, "that is the same as three or four years to the unfortunate prisoner. But I must find out the real truth of the case between now and then."

Yes, M. Daburon only required three or four days to wring a confession from Albert, or at least to make him abandon his system of defense. The difficulty of the prosecution was not being able to produce any witness who had seen the prisoner during the evening of Shrove Tuesday. It was only Saturday, the day of the murder was remarkable enough to fix people's memories, and up till then there had not been time to start a proper investigation. He arranged for five of the most experienced detectives in the secret service to be sent to Bougival, supplied with photographs of the prisoner. They were to scour the entire country between Rueil and La Jonchere, to inquire everywhere, and make the most minute investigations. The photographs would greatly aid their efforts. It was impossible that, on an evening when so many people were about, no one

had noticed the original of the portrait either at the railway station at Rueil or upon one of the roads which lead to La Jonchere, the highroad, and the path by the river. These arrangements made, the investigating magistrate proceeded to the Palais de Justice, and sent for Albert. He had already in the morning received a report, informing him hour by hour of the acts, gestures, and utterances of the prisoner, who had been carefully watched. Nothing in him, the report said, betrayed the criminal. He seemed very sad, but not despairing. After eating lightly, he had gone to the window of his cell, and had there remained standing for more than an hour. Then he had lain down, and quietly gone to sleep. "What an iron constitution!" thought M. Daburon, when the prisoner entered his office.

Albert was no longer the despairing man who, the night before, bewildered with the multiplicity of charges, surprised by the rapidity with which they were brought against him, had writhed beneath the magistrate's gaze, and appeared ready to succumb. Innocent or guilty, he had made up his mind how to act; his face left no doubt of that. On beholding him, the magistrate understood that he would have to change his mode of attack. He therefore gave up his former tactics, and attempted to move him by kindness. It was a hackneyed trick, but almost always successful, like certain pathetic scenes at theatres. Now M. Daburon excelled in producing affecting scenes. No one knew so well as he how to touch those old chords which vibrate still even in the most corrupt hearts: honor, love, and family ties. With Albert, he became kind and friendly, and full of the liveliest compassion. Unfortunate man! how greatly he must suffer, he whose whole life had been like one long enchantment. Recalling the past, the magistrate pictured to him the most touching reminiscences of his early youth, and stirred up the ashes of all his extinct affections. Taking advantage of all that he knew of the prisoner's life, he tortured him by the most mournful allusions to Claire. Why did he persist in bearing alone his great misfortune? Why this morose silence? Should he not rather hasten to reassure her whose very life depended upon his? What was necessary for that? A single word. Then he would be, if not free, at least returned to the world.

It was no longer the magistrate who spoke; it was a father. For a moment he imagined himself in Albert's position. What would he have done after the terrible revelation? He scarcely dared ask himself. He understood the motive which prompted

the murder of Widow Lerouge; he could explain it to himself; he could almost excuse it. (Another trap.) It was certainly a great crime, but in no way revolting to conscience or to reason. Besides, was not the Comte de Commarin the more guilty of the two? Was it not his folly that prepared the way for this terrible event? His son was the victim of fatality, and was greatly to be pitied. But he wasted his eloquence precisely as M. Tabaret had wasted his. Albert appeared in no way affected.

One test, which has often given the desired result, still remained to be tried. On this same day, Saturday, Albert was confronted with the corpse of Widow Lerouge. He appeared impressed by the sad sight, but no more than any one would be, if forced to look at the victim of an assassination four days after the crime. One of the bystanders having exclaimed: "Ah, if she could but speak!" he replied: "That would be very fortunate for me." Since morning, M. Daburon had not gained the least advantage. He had had to acknowledge the failure of his manœuvres; and now this last attempt had not succeeded either. His spite was evident to all, when, suddenly ceasing his wheedling, he harshly gave the order to reconduct the prisoner to his cell. "I will compel him to confess!" he muttered between his teeth. Had Albert confessed his guilt, he would have found M. Daburon disposed to pity him; but as he denied it, he opposed himself to an implacable enemy.

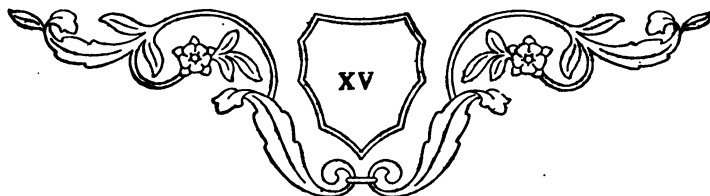
Having previously wished Albert innocent, he now absolutely longed to prove him guilty, and that for a hundred reasons which he was unable to analyze. He remembered, too well, his having had the Vicomte de Commarin for a rival, and his having nearly assassinated him. Had he not repented even to remorse his having signed the warrant of arrest, and his having accepted the duty of investigating the case. Old Tabaret's incomprehensible change of opinion troubled him, too. It was now less the proofs of Albert's guilt which he sought for than the justification of his own conduct as magistrate.

M. Daburon passed all Sunday in listening to the reports of the detectives he had sent to Bougival. They had spared no trouble, they stated, but they could report nothing new. They had heard many people speak of a woman, who pretended, they said, to have seen the assassin leave Widow Lerouge's cottage; but no one had been able to point this woman out to them, or even to give them her name. They all thought it their duty, however, to inform the magistrate that another inquiry was

going on at the same time as theirs. It was directed by M. Tabaret, who personally scoured the country round about in a cabriolet drawn by a very swift horse. He appeared to have under his orders a dozen men, four of whom at least certainly belonged to the Rue de Jerusalem. All the detectives had met him; and he had spoken to them. To one, he had said: "What the deuce are you showing this photograph for? In less than no time you will have a crowd of witnesses, who, to earn three francs, will describe some one more like the portrait than the portrait itself." He had met another on the highroad, and had laughed at him. "You are a simple fellow," he cried out, "to hunt for a hiding man on the highway; look a little aside, and you may find him." Again he had accosted two who were together in a cafe at Bougival, and had taken them aside. "I have him," he said to them. "He is a smart fellow; he came by Chatou. Three people have seen him—two railway porters and a third person whose testimony will be decisive, for she spoke to him. He was smoking."

M. Daburon became so angry with old Tabaret that he immediately started for Bougival, firmly resolved to bring the too zealous man back to Paris, and to report his conduct in the proper quarter. The journey, however, was useless. M. Tabaret, the cabriolet, the swift horse, and the twelve men had all disappeared. On returning home, greatly fatigued, and very much out of temper, the investigating magistrate found the following telegram from the chief of the detective force awaiting him; it was brief, but to the point:

"ROUEN, Sunday.—"The man is found. This evening we start for Paris. The most valuable testimony. GEVROL."



ON Monday morning, at nine o'clock, M. Daburon was preparing to start for the Palais de Justice, where he expected to find Gevrol and his man, and perhaps old Tabaret. His preparations were nearly made, when his servant announced that a young lady, accompanied by another considerably older,

asked to speak with him. She declined giving her name, saying, however, that she would not refuse it, if it was absolutely necessary in order to be received. "Show them in," said the magistrate. He thought it must be a relation of one or other of the prisoners, whose case he had had in hand when this fresh crime occurred. At the sound of the opening of the door he cast a careless glance in the mirror. But he immediately started with a movement of dismay, as if he had seen a ghost.

"Claire!" he stammered, "Claire!"

And as if he feared equally either being deceived by an illusion, or actually seeing her whose name he had uttered, he turned slowly round. It was truly Mademoiselle d'Arlange. Never, even in the time when a sight of her was his greatest happiness, had she appeared to him more fascinating. In her eyes, rendered more brilliant by recent tears but partly wiped away, shone the noblest resolution.

She advanced calm and dignified, and held out her hand to the magistrate in that English style that some ladies can render so gracefully. "We are always friends, are we not?" asked she, with a sad smile. The magistrate did not dare take the ungloved hand she held out to him. He scarcely touched it with the tips of his fingers, as though he feared too great an emotion. "Yes," he replied indistinctly, "I am always devoted to you."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange sat down in the large armchair, where, two nights previously, old Tabaret had planned Albert's arrest. M. Daburon remained standing, leaning against his writing-table. "You know why I have come?" asked the young girl. With a nod, he replied in the affirmative. "I only knew of this dreadful event yesterday," pursued Claire; "my grandmother considered it best to hide it from me, and, but for my devoted Schmidt, I should still be ignorant of it all. What a night I have passed! At first I was terrified; but, when they told me that all depended upon you, my fears were dispelled. It is for my sake, is it not, that you have undertaken this investigation? Oh, you are good, I know it! How can I ever express my gratitude?" What humiliation for the worthy magistrate were these heartfelt thanks! Yes, he had at first thought of Mademoiselle d'Arlange, but since— He bowed his head to avoid Claire's glance, so pure and so daring. "Do not thank me, mademoiselle," he stammered, "I have not the claim that you think upon your gratitude."

Claire had been too troubled herself, at first, to notice the magistrate's agitation. The trembling of his voice attracted her attention; but she did not suspect the cause. "And yet, sir," she continued, "I thank you all the same. I might never have dared go to another magistrate, to speak to a stranger! Besides, what value would another attach to my words, not knowing me? While you, so generous, will reassure me, will tell me by what awful mistake he has been arrested like a villain and thrown into prison."—"Alas!" sighed the magistrate, so low that Claire scarcely heard him, and did not understand the terrible meaning of the exclamation.—"With you," she continued, "I am not afraid. You are my friend, you told me so; you will not refuse my prayers. Give him his liberty quickly. I do not know exactly of what he is accused, but I swear to you that he is innocent."

Claire spoke in the positive manner of one who saw no obstacle in the way of the very simple and natural desire which she had expressed. The magistrate was silent. He was really an upright man, as good as the best, as is proved from the fact that he trembled at the moment of unveiling the fatal truth. He hesitated to pronounce the words which, like a whirlwind, would overturn the fragile edifice of this young girl's happiness.

"And if I should tell you, mademoiselle," he commenced, "that M. Albert is not innocent?" She half-raised herself with a protesting gesture. He continued: "If I should tell you that he is guilty?"—"Oh, sir!" interrupted Claire, "you can not think so!"—"I do think so, mademoiselle," exclaimed the magistrate in a sad voice, "and I must add that I am morally certain of it."—Claire looked at the investigating magistrate with profound amazement. Had she heard him aright? Did she understand? She was far from sure. Was he not deluding her by a cruel, unworthy jest?

Not daring to raise his eyes, he continued in a tone, expressive of the sincerest pity: "I suffer cruelly for you at this moment, mademoiselle; but I have the sad courage to tell you the truth, and you must summon yours to hear it. It is far better that you should know everything from the mouth of a friend. Summon, then, all your fortitude; strengthen your noble soul against a most dreadful misfortune. No, there is no mistake. Justice has not been deceived. The Vicomte de Commarin is accused of an assassination; and everything, you understand me, proves that he committed it." M. Daburon pronounced this

last sentence slowly, word by word. He expected a burst of despair, tears, distressing cries. She might perhaps faint away; and he stood ready to call in the worthy Schmidt. He was mistaken. Claire drew herself up full of energy and courage. The flame of indignation flushed her cheeks, and dried her tears. "It is false," she cried, "and those who say it are liars! He can not be—no, he can not be an assassin. If he were here, sir, and should himself say, 'It is true,' I would refuse to believe it; I would still cry out: 'It is false!'"

"He has not yet admitted it," continued the magistrate, "but he will confess. Even if he should not, there are more proofs than are needed to convict him."

"Ah! well," interrupted Mademoiselle d'Arlange, in a voice filled with emotion, "I assert, I repeat, that justice is deceived. Yes," she persisted, in answer to the magistrate's gesture of denial, "yes, he is innocent. I am sure of it; and I would proclaim it, even were the whole world to join with you in accusing him."

The investigating magistrate attempted timidly to make an objection; Claire quickly interrupted him. "Must I then, sir," said she, "in order to convince you, forget that I am a young girl, and that I am not talking to my mother, but to a man! For his sake I will do so. It is four years, sir, since we first loved each other. For four years there has never been a secret between us; he lived in me, as I lived in him. He is, like me, alone in the world; his father never loved him. Sustained one by the other, we have passed through many unhappy days; and it is at the very moment our trials are ending that he has become a criminal? Why? tell me, why?"

"Neither the name nor the fortune of the Comte de Commarin would descend to him, mademoiselle; and the knowledge of it came upon him with a sudden shock. One old woman alone was able to prove this. To maintain his position, he killed her."

"What infamy," cried the young girl, "what a shameful, wicked calumny! I know, sir, that story of fallen greatness; he himself told me of it. It is true that for three days this misfortune unmanned him; but, if he was dismayed, it was on my account more than his own. Ah! what to me are that great name, that immense wealth? I owe to them the only unhappiness I have ever known. Was it, then, for such things that I loved him? It was thus that I replied to him; and he, so



sad, immediately recovered his gaiety. He thanked me, saying: 'You love me; the rest is of no consequence.' I chided him, then, for having doubted me; and after that, you pretend that he cowardly assassinated an old woman? You would not dare repeat it." Mademoiselle d'Arlange ceased speaking, a smile of victory on her lips. That smile meant: "At last I have attained my end: you are conquered."

The investigating magistrate did not long leave this smiling illusion to the unhappy child. "You do not know, mademoiselle," he resumed, "how a sudden calamity may affect a good man's reason. God preserve me from doubting all that you have said; but picture to yourself the immensity of the blow which struck M. de Commarin. Can you say that on leaving you he did not give way to despair? Think of the extremities to which it may have led him. He may have been for a time bewildered, and have acted unconsciously."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's face grew deathly pale, and betrayed the utmost terror. The magistrate thought that at last doubt had begun to affect her pure and noble belief. "He must, then, have been mad," she murmured.—"Possibly," replied the magistrate; "and yet the circumstances of the crime denote a well-laid plan. Believe me, then, mademoiselle, and do not be too confident. Pray, and wait patiently for the issue of this terrible trial. You used to have in me the confidence a daughter gives to her father; do not, then, refuse my advice. Remain silent and wait. Hide your grief to all; you might hereafter regret having exposed it. Young, inexperienced, without a guide, without a mother, alas! you sadly misplaced your first affections."

"No, sir, no," stammered Claire. "Ah!" she added, "you talk like the rest of the world, that prudent and egotistical world, which I despise and hate."

"Poor child," continued M. Daburon, pitiless even in his compassion; "unhappy young girl! This is your first deception! But you are young; you are brave; your life will not be ruined. There is no wound, I know by experience, which time does not heal."

Claire tried to grasp what the magistrate was saying, but his words reached her only as confused sounds, their meaning entirely escaped her. "I do not understand you, sir," she said. "What advice, then, do you give me?"

"The only advice that reason dictates, and that my affection

for you can suggest, mademoiselle. I say to you: 'Courage, Claire, resign yourself to the saddest, the greatest sacrifice which honor can ask of a young girl. Weep, yes, weep for your deceived love; but forget it. He whom you have loved is no longer worthy of you.' " The magistrate stopped, slightly frightened. Mademoiselle d'Arlange had become livid. But though the body was weak, the soul still remained firm. "You said just now," she murmured, "that he could only have committed this crime in a moment of distraction, in a fit of madness?"

"Yes, it is possible."

"Then, sir, not knowing what he did, he can not be guilty."—"Neither justice nor society, mademoiselle," he replied, "can take that into account. God alone, who sees into the depths of our hearts, can judge, can decide those questions which human justice must pass by. In our eyes, M. de Commarin is a criminal. Even if he were acquitted, and I wish he may be, but without hope, he will not be less unworthy. Therefore, forget him."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange stopped the magistrate with a look in which flashed the strongest resentment. "That is to say," she exclaimed, "that you counsel me to abandon him in his misfortune. All the world deserts him; and your prudence advises me to act with the world. Men behave thus, I have heard, when one of their friends is down; but women never do. When the last friend has boldly taken to flight, when the last relation has abandoned him, woman remains. I may be timid," she continued with increasing energy, "but I am no coward. I chose Albert voluntarily from among all. Whatever happens, I will never desert him. He would have given me half of his prosperity and of his glory. I will share, whether he wishes it or not, half of his shame and of his misfortune. I love him. It is no more in my power to cease loving him than it is to arrest, by the sole effort of my will, the beating of my heart. You will send him to a convict prison. I will follow him; and in the prison, under the convict's dress, I will yet love him. No, nothing will separate me from him, nothing short of death! And, if he must mount the scaffold, I shall die, I know it, from the blow which kills him."

M. Daburon had buried his face in his hands. He did not wish Claire to perceive a trace of the emotion which affected him. "How she loves him!" he thought, "how she loves him!" All the stings of jealousy were rending him. What would not

be his delight if he were the object of so irresistible a passion as that which burst forth before him! He had, too, a young and ardent soul, a burning thirst for love. Why do so many men pass through life dispossessed of love, while others, the vilest beings sometimes, seem to possess a mysterious power, which charms and seduces, and inspires those blind and impetuous feelings which to assert themselves rush to the sacrifice all the while longing for it? Have women, then, no reason, no discernment? Mademoiselle d'Arlange's silence brought the magistrate back to the reality. He raised his eyes to her. Overcome by the violence of her emotion, she lay back in her chair and breathed with such difficulty that M. Daburon feared she was about to faint. He moved quickly toward the bell, to summon aid; but Claire noticed the movement and stopped him. "What would you do?" she asked.

"You seemed suffering so," he stammered, "that I—"

"It is nothing, sir," replied she. "I may seem weak, but I am not so. It is cruel for a young girl to have to do violence to all her feelings. But I do not regret it; it was for his sake. That which I do regret is my having lowered myself so far as to defend him; but he will forgive me that one doubt. Your assurance took me unawares. A man like him does not need defense: his innocence must be proved; and, God helping me, I will prove it." As Claire was half-rising to depart, M. Daburon detained her by a gesture. In his blindness he thought he would be doing wrong to leave this poor young girl in the slightest way deceived. Having gone so far as to begin, he persuaded himself that his duty bade him go on to the end. He said to himself, in all good faith, that he would thus preserve Claire from herself, and spare her in the future many bitter regrets. "It is painful, mademoiselle—" he began. Claire did not let him finish. "Enough, sir," said she; "all that you can say will be of no avail. I respect your unhappy conviction. If you were truly my friend, I would ask you to aid me in the task of saving him, to which I am about to devote myself. But, doubtless, you would not do so."

"If you knew the proofs which I possess, mademoiselle," he said in a cold tone, "if I detailed them to you, you would no longer hope."

"Speak, sir," cried Claire imperiously.

"You wish it, mademoiselle? Very well; I will give you in detail all the evidence we have collected. There is one which

alone is decisive. The murder was committed on the evening of Shrove Tuesday; and the prisoner can not give an account of what he did on that evening. He went out, however, and only returned home about two o'clock in the morning, his clothes soiled and torn, and his gloves frayed."

"Oh! enough, sir, enough!" interrupted Claire, whose eyes beamed once more with happiness. "You say it was on Shrove Tuesday evening?"—"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Ah! I was sure," she cried triumphantly. "I told you truly that he could not be guilty." She clasped her hands, and from the movement of her lips it was evident that she was praying. The magistrate was so disconcerted that he forgot to admire her. "Well?" he asked impatiently.

"Sir," replied Claire, "if that is your strongest proof, it exists no longer. Albert passed the entire evening you speak of with me."—"With you?" stammered the magistrate.—"Yes, with me, at my home."

M. Daburon was astounded. Was he dreaming? He hardly knew. "What!" he exclaimed, "the vicomte was at your house? Your grandmother, your companion, your servants, they all saw him and spoke to him?"

"No, sir; he came and left in secret. He wished no one to see him; he desired to be alone with me."

"Ah!" said the magistrate with a sigh of relief. The sigh signified: "It's all clear—only too evident. She is determined to save him, at the risk even of compromising her reputation. Poor girl! But has this idea only just occurred to her?" The "Ah!" was interpreted very differently by Mademoiselle d'Arlange. She thought that M. Daburon was astonished at her consenting to receive Albert. "Your surprise is an insult, sir," said she.

"Mademoiselle!"—"A daughter of my family, sir, may receive her betrothed without danger of anything occurring for which she would have to blush."

"I had no such insulting thought as you imagine, mademoiselle," said the magistrate. "I was only wondering how M. de Commarin went secretly to your house when his approaching marriage gave him the right to present himself openly at all hours. I still wonder how, on such a visit, he could get his clothes in the condition in which we found them."

"That is to say, sir," replied Claire bitterly, "that you doubt my word!"—"The circumstances are such, mademoiselle."—"You accuse me, then, of falsehood, sir. Know that, were we crim-

inals, we should not descend to justifying ourselves; we should never pray nor ask for pardon."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange's haughty, contemptuous tone could only anger the magistrate. "Above all, mademoiselle," he answered, severely, "I am a magistrate; and I have a duty to perform. A crime has been committed. Everything points to M. Albert de Commarin as the guilty man. I arrest him; I examine him; and I find overwhelming proofs against him. You come and tell me that they are false; that is not enough. So long as you addressed me as a friend, you found me kind and gentle. Now it is the magistrate to whom you speak; and it is the magistrate who answers, 'Prove it.'—"My word, sir."—"Prove it!"

Mademoiselle d'Arlange rose slowly, casting upon the magistrate a look full of astonishment and suspicion. "Would you, then, be glad, sir," she asked, "to find Albert guilty? Would it give you such great pleasure to have him convicted? Are you sure that you are not, armed with the law, revenging yourself upon a rival?"—"This is too much," murmured the magistrate, "this is too much!"

"Do you know the unusual, the dangerous, position we are in at this moment? One day, I remember, you declared your love for me. It appeared to me sincere and honest; it touched me. I was obliged to refuse you because I loved another; and I pitied you. Now that other is accused of murder, and you are his judge; and I find myself between you two, praying to you for him. In undertaking the investigation you acquired an opportunity to help him; and yet you seem to be against him." Every word Claire uttered fell upon M. Daburon's heart like a slap on his face. "Mademoiselle, said he, "your grief has been too much for you. From you alone could I pardon what you have just said. If you think that Albert's fate depends upon my pleasure, you are mistaken. To convince me is nothing; it is necessary to convince others. That I should believe you is all very natural; I know you. But what weight will others attach to your testimony when you go to them with a true story—most true, I believe, but yet highly improbable?"

Tears came into Claire's eyes. "If I have unjustly offended you, sir," said she, "pardon me: misfortune makes one wicked."

"You can not offend me, mademoiselle," replied the magistrate. "I have already told you that I am devoted to your service."

"Then, sir, help me to prove the truth of what I have said. I will tell you everything."

M. Daburon was fully convinced that Claire was seeking to deceive him; but her confidence astonished him.

"Sir," began Claire, "you know what obstacles have stood in the way of my marriage with Albert. The Comte de Commarin would not accept me for a daughter-in-law because I am poor, I possess nothing. It took Albert five years to triumph over his father's objections. At last, about a month ago, he gave his consent of his own accord. But these hesitations, delays, refusals, had deeply hurt my grandmother. Though the wedding day had been fixed, the marquise declared that we should not be compromised nor laughed at again for any apparent haste to contract a marriage so advantageous, that we had often before been accused of ambition. She decided, therefore, that, until the publication of the banns, Albert should only be admitted into the house every other day, for two hours in the afternoon, and in her presence. Such was the state of affairs when, on Sunday morning, a note came to me from Albert. He told me that pressing business would prevent his coming, although it was his regular day. What could have happened to keep him away? I feared some evil. The next day I awaited him impatiently and distracted, when his valet brought Schmidt a note for me. In that letter, sir, Albert entreated me to grant him an interview. It was necessary, he wrote, that he should have a long conversation with me, alone, and without delay. Our whole future, he added, depended upon this interview. He left me to fix the day and hour, urging me to confide in no one. I sent him word to meet me on the Tuesday evening at the little garden gate which opens into an unfrequented street. To inform me of his presence, he was to knock just as nine o'clock chimed at the Invalides."—"Excuse me, mademoiselle," interrupted M. Daburon, "what day did you write to M. Albert?"—"On Tuesday."—"Can you fix the hour?"—"I must have sent the letter between two and three o'clock."—"Thanks, mademoiselle. Continue, I pray."

"All my anticipations," continued Claire, "were realized. I retired during the evening, and went into the garden a little before the appointed time. I had procured the key of the little door; and I at once tried it. Unfortunately, I could not make it turn, the lock was so rusty. I was in despair, when nine o'clock struck. At the third stroke, Albert knocked. I told

him of the accident; and threw him the key, that he might try and unlock the door. He tried but without success. I then begged him to postpone our interview. He replied that it was impossible, that what he had to say admitted of no delay; that, during three days he had hesitated about confiding in me, and had suffered martyrdom, and that he could endure it no longer. We were speaking, you must understand, through the door. At last, he declared that he would climb over the wall. I begged him not to do so, fearing an accident. The wall is very high, as you know, the top is covered with pieces of broken glass, and the acacia branches stretch out above like a hedge. But he laughed at my fears, and said that, unless I absolutely forbade him to do so, he was going to attempt to scale the wall. I dared not say no; and he risked it. I was very frightened, and trembled like a leaf. Fortunately, he is very active, and got over without hurting himself. He had come, sir, to tell me of the misfortune which had befallen him. We first of all sat down upon the little seat you know of, in front of the grove; then, as the rain was falling, we took shelter in the summer house. It was past midnight when Albert left me, quieted and almost gay. He went back in the same manner, only with less danger, because I made him use the gardener's ladder, which I laid down alongside the wall when he had reached the other side."

This account, given in the simplest and most natural manner, puzzled M. Daburon. What was he to think? "Mademoiselle," he asked, "had the rain commenced to fall when M. Albert climbed over the wall?"

"No, sir, the first drops fell when we were on the seat; I recollect it very well, because he opened his umbrella, and I thought of Paul and Virginia."

"Excuse me a minute, mademoiselle," said the magistrate. He sat down at his desk, and rapidly wrote two letters. In the first, he gave orders for Albert to be brought at once to his office in the Palais de Justice. In the second, he directed a detective to go immediately to the Faubourg St. Germain to the d'Arlange house, and examine the wall at the bottom of the garden, and make a note of any marks of its having been scaled, if any such existed. He explained that the wall had been climbed twice, both before and during the rain; consequently the marks of the going and returning would be different from each other. He enjoined upon the detective to proceed with the utmost caution, and to invent a plausible pretext

which would explain his investigations. Having finished writing, the magistrate rang for his servant, who soon appeared. "Here," said he, "are two letters, which you must take to my clerk, Constant. Tell him to read them, and to have the orders they contain executed at once—at once, you understand. Run, take a cab, and be quick! Ah! one word. If Constant is not in my office, have him sought for; he will not be far off, as he is waiting for me. Go quickly!" M. Daburon then turned and said to Claire. "Have you kept the letter, mademoiselle, in which M. Albert asked for this interview?"

"Yes, sir, I even think I have it with me." She arose, felt in her pocket, and drew out a much crumpled piece of paper. "Here it is!" The investigating magistrate took it. A suspicion crossed his mind. At a glance, he read the ten lines of the note. "No date," he murmured, "no stamp, nothing at all."

Claire did not hear him; she was racking her brain to find other proofs of the interview. "Sir," said she suddenly, "it often happens, that when we wish to be, and believe ourselves alone, we are nevertheless observed. Summon, I beseech you, all of my grandmother's servants, and inquire if any of them saw Albert that night."

"Inquire of your servants? Can you dream of such a thing, mademoiselle?"

"What, sir? You fear that I shall be compromised. What of that, if he is only freed?" M. Daburon could not help admiring her. What sublime devotion in this young girl, whether she spoke the truth or not!

"That is not all," she added; "the key which I threw to Albert, he did not return it to me; he must have forgotten to do so. If it is found in his possession, it will well prove that he was in the garden."

"I will give orders respecting it, mademoiselle."

"There is still another thing," continued Claire; "while I am here, send some one to examine the wall." She seemed to think of everything.

"That is already done, mademoiselle," replied M. Daburon. "I will not hide from you that one of the letters which I have just sent off ordered an examination of your grandmother's wall, a secret examination, though, be assured." Claire rose joyfully, and for the second time held out her hand to the magistrate. "Oh, thanks!" she said, "a thousand thanks! Now I can well see that you are with me. But I have



still another idea; Albert ought to have the note I wrote on Tuesday."

"No, mademoiselle, he burned it."

Claire drew back. She imagined she felt a touch of irony in the magistrate's reply. There was none, however. M. Daburon remembered the letter thrown into the fire by Albert on the Tuesday afternoon. It could only have been the one Claire had sent him. It was to her, then, that the words, "She can not resist me," applied. He understood, now, the action and the remark. "Can you understand, mademoiselle," he next asked, "how M. de Commarin could lead justice astray, and expose me to committing a most deplorable error, when it would have been so easy to have told me all this?"

"It seems to me, sir, that an honorable man can not confess that he has obtained a secret interview from a lady, until he has full permission from her to do so."

There was nothing to reply to this; and the sentiments expressed by Mademoiselle d'Arlange gave a meaning to one of Albert's replies in the examination. "This is not all yet, mademoiselle," continued the magistrate; "all that you have told me here, you must repeat in my office, at the Palais de Justice. My clerk will take down your testimony, and you must sign it. This proceeding will be painful to you; but it is a necessary formality."

"Ah, sir, I will do so with pleasure. What can I refuse, when I know that he is in prison?" She rose from her seat, readjusting her cloak and the strings of her bonnet. "Is it necessary," she asked "that I should await the return of the police agents who are examining the wall?"

"It is needless, mademoiselle."

"Then," she continued in a sweet voice, "I can only beseech you," she clasped her hands, "conjure you," her eyes implored, "to let Albert out of prison."

"He shall be liberated as soon as possible; I give my word."

"Oh, to-day, dear M. Daburon, to-day, I beg of you, now, at once! Since he is innocent, be kind, for you are our friend. Do you wish me to go down on my knees?"

The magistrate had only just time to extend his arms, and prevent her. He was choking with emotion, the unhappy man! Ah! how much he envied the prisoner's lot! "That which you ask of me is impossible, mademoiselle," said he in an almost inaudible voice, "impracticable, upon my honor. Ah! if it

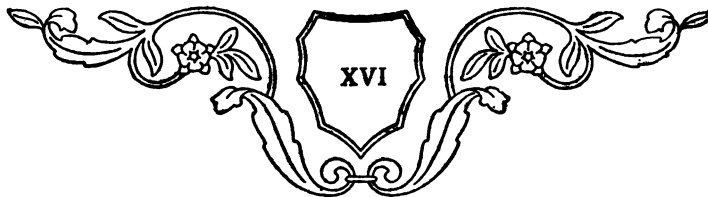
depended upon me alone, I could not, even were he guilty, see you weep, and resist."

Mademoiselle d'Arlange, hitherto so firm, could no longer restrain her sobs. "Miserable girl that I am!" she cried, "he is suffering, he is in prison; I am free, and yet I can do nothing for him! Can I not find one man who will help me? Yes," she said after a moment's reflection, "there is one man who owes himself to Albert; since he it was who put him in this position—the Comte de Commarin. He is his father, and yet he has abandoned him. Ah, well! I will remind him that he still has a son."

The magistrate rose to see her to the door; but she had already disappeared, taking the kind-hearted Schmidt with her.

M. Daburon, more dead than alive, sank back again in his chair. His eyes filled with tears. "And that is what she is!" he murmured. "Ah! I made no vulgar choice. I had divined and understood all her good qualities." In the midst of his meditations, a sudden thought passed like a flash across his brain. Had Claire spoken the truth? Had she not been playing a part previously prepared? No, most decidedly no! But she might have been herself deceived, might have been the dupe of some skilful trick. In that case old Tabaret's prediction was now realized. Tabaret had said: "Look out for an indisputable alibi." How could he show the falsity of this one, planned in advance, affirmed by Claire, who was herself deceived? How could he expose a plan, so well laid that the prisoner had been able without danger to await certain results, with his arms folded, and without himself moving in the matter?

He arose. "Oh!" he said in a loud voice, as though encouraging himself, "at the Palais, all will be unraveled."



**M.** DABURON had been surprised at Claire's visit. M. de Commarin was still more so, when his valet whispered to him that Mademoiselle d'Arlange desired a moment's conversation with him. He hesitated to receive her, fearing a

painful and disagreeable scene. What could she want with him? To inquire about Albert, of course. And what could he reply? He sent a message, asking her to wait a few minutes in one of the little drawing-rooms on the ground floor. He did not keep her waiting long, his appetite having been destroyed by the mere announcement of her visit.

As soon as he appeared, Claire saluted him with one of those graceful, yet highly dignified bows, which distinguished the Marquise d'Arlange. "Sir—," she began.

"You come, do you not, my poor child, to obtain news of the unhappy boy?" asked M. de Commarin.

"No, sir," replied the young girl; "I come, on the contrary, to bring you news. Albert is innocent."

The comte looked at her most attentively, persuaded that grief had affected her reason; but in that case her madness was very quiet. "I never doubted it," continued Claire; "but now I have the most positive proof."

"Are you quite sure of what you are saying?" inquired the comte, whose eyes betrayed his doubt. Mademoiselle d'Arlange understood his thoughts; her interview with M. Daburon had given her experience. "I state nothing which is not of the utmost accuracy," she replied, "and easily proved. I have just come from M. Daburon, the investigating magistrate, who is one of my grandmother's friends; and, after what I told him, he is convinced that Albert is innocent."

"He told you that, Claire!" exclaimed the comte. "My child, are you sure, are you not mistaken?"

"No, sir. I told him something, of which every one was ignorant, and of which Albert, who is a gentleman, could not speak. I told him that Albert passed with me, in my grandmother's garden, all that evening on which the crime was committed. He had asked to see me—"

"But your word will not be sufficient."

"There are proofs, and justice has them by this time."

"Heavens! Is it really possible?" cried the comte, who was beside himself.

"Ah, sir!" said Mademoiselle d'Arlange bitterly, "you are his father, and you suspected him! You do not know him, then. You were abandoning him, without trying to defend him."

M. de Commarin was not difficult to convince. Without thinking, without discussion, he put faith in Claire's assertions. Yes, he had been overcome by the magistrate's certitude, he had told

himself that what was most unlikely was true; and he had bowed his head. Albert innocent! The thought descended upon his heart like heavenly dew. During the last three days, he had discovered how great was his affection for Albert. He had loved him tenderly, for he had never been able to discard him, in spite of his frightful suspicions as to his paternity. For three days, the knowledge of the crime imputed to his unhappy son, the thought of the punishment which awaited him, had nearly killed the father. And after all he was innocent!

"But, then, mademoiselle," asked the comte, "are they going to release him?"

"Alas! sir, I demanded that they should at once set him at liberty. It is just, is it not, since he is not guilty? But the magistrate replied that it was not possible; that he was not the master; that Albert's fate depended on many others. It was then that I resolved to come to you for aid."

"Can I then do something?"

"I at least hope so. I am only a poor girl, very ignorant; and I know no one in the world. I do not know what can be done to get him released from prison. There ought, however, to be some means for obtaining justice. Will you not try all that can be done, sir, you, who are his father?"

"Yes," replied M. de Commarin quickly, "yes, and without losing a minute."

Since Albert's arrest, the comte had been plunged in a dull stupor. In his profound grief, seeing only ruin and disaster about him, he had done nothing to shake off this mental paralysis. The frightful darkness was dispelled; he saw a glimmering on the horizon; he recovered the energy of his youth. "Let us go," he said. Suddenly the radiance in his face changed to sadness, mixed with anger. "But where?" he asked. "At what door shall we knock with any hope of success? In the olden times, I would have sought the king. But to-day! Even the emperor himself can not interfere with the law. We shall certainly have justice; but to obtain it, promptly is an art taught in schools that I have not frequented."

"Let us try, at least, sir," persisted Claire. "Let us seek out judges, generals, ministers, any one. Only lead me to them. I will speak; and you shall see if we do not succeed." The comte took Claire's little hands between his own, and held them a moment, pressing them with paternal tenderness. "Brave girl!" he cried, "you are a noble, courageous woman, Claire!

Good blood never fails. I did not know you. Yes, you shall be my daughter; and you shall be happy together, Albert and you. But we must not rush about everywhere, like wild geese. We need some one to tell us whom we should address—some guide, lawyer, barrister. Ah!" he cried, "I have it—Noel!" Claire raised her eyes to the comte's in surprise.

"He is my son," replied M. de Commarin, evidently embarrassed, "my other son, Albert's brother. The best and worthiest of men," he added, repeating quite appropriately a phrase already uttered by M. Daburon. "He is a barrister; he knows all about the Palais; he will tell us what to do." Noel's name, thus thrown into the midst of this conversation so full of hope, oppressed Claire's heart. The comte perceived her affright. "Do not feel anxious, dear child," he said. "Noel is good; and I will tell you more, he loves Albert. Do not shake your head so; Noel told me himself, on this very spot, that he did not believe Albert guilty. He declared that he intended doing everything to dispel the fatal mistake, and that he would be his barrister. I will send for him," continued M. de Commarin; "he is now with Albert's mother, who brought him up, and who is now on her deathbed."—"Albert's mother!"

"Yes, my child. Albert will explain to you what may perhaps seem to you an enigma. Now time presses. But I think—" He stopped suddenly. -He thought that, instead of sending for Noel at Madame Gerdy's, he might go there himself. He would thus see Valerie! and he had longed to see her again so much! It was one of those actions which the heart urges, but which one does not dare risk, because a thousand subtle reasons and interests are against it.

"It will be quicker, perhaps," observed the comte, "to go to Noel."

"Let us start then, sir."

"I hardly know though, my child," said the old gentleman, hesitating, "whether I may, whether I ought to take you with me. Propriety—"

"Ah, sir, propriety has nothing to do with it!" replied Claire impetuously. "With you, and for his sake, I can go anywhere. I am ready, sir."

"Very well, then," said the comte. Then, ringing the bell violently, he called to the servant: "My carriage." In descending the steps, he insisted upon Claire's taking his arm. The gallant and elegant politeness of the friend of the Comte d'Artois

reappeared. "You have taken twenty years from my age," he said; "it is but right that I should devote to you the youth you have restored to me."

As soon as Claire had entered the carriage, he said to the footman: "Rue St. Lazare, quick!" Aided by the concierge's directions, the comte and the young girl went toward Madame Gerdy's apartments. He was, then, about to see her again! His emotion pressed his heart like a vise. "M. Noel Gerdy?" he asked of the servant. The barrister had just that moment gone out. She did not know where he had gone; but he had said he should not be out more than half an hour. "We will wait for him, then," said the comte.

He advanced; and the servant drew back to let them pass. Noel had strictly forbidden her to admit any visitors; but the Comte de Commarin was one of those whose appearance makes servants forget all their orders. Three persons were in the room into which the servant introduced the comte and Mademoiselle d'Arlange. They were the parish priest, the doctor, and a tall man, an officer of the Legion of Honor, whose figure and bearing indicated the old soldier. They were conversing near the fireplace, and the arrival of strangers appeared to astonish them exceedingly. In bowing, in response to M. de Commarin's and Claire's salutations, they seemed to inquire their business; but this hesitation was brief, for the soldier almost immediately offered Mademoiselle d'Arlange a chair.

The comte considered that his presence was inopportune; and he thought that he was called upon to introduce himself and explain his visit. "You will excuse me, gentlemen," said he, "if I am indiscreet. I did not think so when I asked to wait for Noel, whom I have the most pressing need of seeing. I am the Comte de Commarin."

At this name the old soldier let go the back of the chair which he was still holding and haughtily raised his head. An angry light flashed in his eyes, and he made a threatening gesture. His lips moved, as if he were about to speak; but he restrained himself and retired, bowing his head, to the window. Neither the comte nor the two other men noticed his strange behavior; but it did not escape Claire. While Mademoiselle d'Arlange sat down rather surprised, the comte, much embarrassed at his position, went up to the priest, and asked in a low voice: "What is, I pray, M. l'Abbe, Madame Gerdy's condition?"

The doctor, who had a sharp ear, heard the question, and approached quickly. "I fear, sir," he said, "that she can not live throughout the day."

The comte pressed his hand against his forehead, as though he had felt a sudden pain there. "Does she recognize her friends?" he murmured.

"No, sir. Since last evening, however, there has been a great change. She was very uneasy all last night: she had moments of fierce delirium. About an hour ago we thought she was recovering her senses, and we sent for M. l'Abbe."

"Very needlessly, though," put in the priest, "and it is a sad misfortune. Her reason is quite gone. Poor woman! I have known her ten years; I have been to see her nearly every week; I never knew a more worthy person."

"She must suffer dreadfully," said the doctor. Almost at the same instant, and as if to bear out the doctor's words, they heard stifled cries from the next room, the door of which was slightly open. "Do you hear?" exclaimed the comte, trembling from head to foot. Claire understood nothing of this strange scene. Dark presentiments oppressed her; she felt as though she were enveloped in an atmosphere of evil. She grew frightened, rose from her chair, and drew near the comte.

"She is, I presume, in there?" asked M. de Commarin.

"Yes, sir," harshly answered the old soldier, who had also drawn near.

At any other time the comte would have noticed the soldier's tone and have resented it. Now he did not even raise his eyes. He remained insensible to everything. Was she not there, close to him? His thoughts were in the past; it seemed to him but yesterday that he had quitted her for the last time. "I should very much like to see her," he said timidly.—"That is impossible," replied the old soldier.—"Why?" stammered the comte.—"At least, M. de Commarin," replied the soldier, "let her die in peace."

The comte started, as if he had been struck. His eyes encountered the officer's; he lowered them like a criminal before his judge.

"Nothing need prevent the comte's entering Madame Gerdy's room," put in the doctor, who purposely saw nothing of all this. "She would probably not notice his presence; and if—"

"Oh, she would perceive nothing!" said the priest. "I have just spoken to her, taken her hand; she remained quite insen-

sible." The old soldier reflected deeply. "Enter," said he at last to the comte; "perhaps it is God's will."

The comte tottered, so that the doctor offered to assist him. He gently motioned him away. The doctor and the priest entered with him; Claire and the old soldier remained at the threshold of the door, facing the bed. The comte took three or four steps, and was obliged to stop. He wished to, but could not go farther. Could this dying woman really be Valerie? He did not recognize her. But she knew him, or rather divined his presence. With supernatural strength, she raised herself, exposing her shoulders and emaciated arms; then pushing away the ice from her forehead, and throwing back her still plentiful hair, bathed with water and perspiration, she cried: "Guy! Guy!" The comte trembled all over. He did not perceive that which immediately struck all the other persons present—the transformation in the sick woman. Her contracted features relaxed, a celestial joy spread over her face, and her eyes, sunken by disease, assumed an expression of infinite tenderness.

"Guy," said she in a voice heartrending by its sweetness, "you have come at last! How long, O my God! I have waited for you! You can not think what I have suffered by your absence. I should have died of grief had it not been for the hope of seeing you again. Who kept you from me? Your parents again? How cruel of them! Did you not tell them that no one could love you here below as I do? No, that is not it; I remember. You were angry when you left me. Your friends wished to separate us; they said that I was deceiving you with another. But you did not believe the wicked calumny, you scorned it, for you are here? I deceive you?" continued the dying woman; "only a madman would believe it. Am I not yours, your very own, heart and soul? Was I not yours, alone, from the very first? I never hesitated to give myself entirely to you; I felt that I was born for you, Guy, do you remember? I was working for a lace-maker, and was barely earning a living. You told me you were a poor student; I thought you were depriving yourself for me. You insisted on having our little apartment on the Quai St. Michel done up. It was lovely, with the new paper all covered with flowers, which we hung ourselves. From the window we could see the great trees of the Tuileries gardens; and by leaning out a little we could see the sun set through the arches of the bridges. Oh, those happy days! But you deceived me! You were not a poor student.



One day, when taking my work home, I met you in an elegant carriage, with tall footmen, dressed in liveries covered with gold lace, behind. I could not believe my eyes. That evening you told me the truth, that you were a nobleman and immensely rich. Oh, my darling, why did you tell me?"

Had she her reason, or was this a mere delirium? Great tears rolled down the Comte de Commarin's wrinkled face, and the doctor and the priest were touched by the sad spectacle of an old man weeping like a child.

"After that," continued Madame Gerdy, "we left the Quai Saint-Michel. You wished it; and I obeyed in spite of my apprehensions. You told me that, to please you, I ought to look like a great lady. You provided teachers for me, for I was so ignorant that I scarcely knew how to sign my name. Do you remember the queer spelling in my first letter? Ah, Guy, if you had really only been a poor student! When I knew that you were so rich, I lost my simplicity, my thoughtfulness, my gaiety. I feared that you would think me covetous, that you would imagine that your fortune influenced my love. Men who, like you, have millions, must be unhappy! They must be always doubting and full of suspicions; they can never be sure whether it is themselves or their gold which is loved, and this awful doubt makes them mistrustful, jealous, and cruel. Oh, my dearest, why did we leave our dear little room? There we were happy. You thought to raise me, but you only sunk me lower. You were proud of our love; you published it abroad. Vainly I asked you in mercy to leave me in obscurity and unknown. Soon the whole town knew that I was your mistress. Every one was talking of the money you spent on me. How I blushed at the flaunting luxury you thrust upon me! You were satisfied, because my beauty became celebrated; I wept, because my shame became so too. Was not my name in the papers? And it was through the same papers that I heard of your approaching marriage. Unhappy woman! I should have fled from you, but I had not the courage. I resigned myself, without an effort, to the most humiliating, the most shameful of positions. You were married, and I remained your mistress. Oh, what anguish I suffered during that terrible evening. I was alone in my own home, in that room so associated with you; and you were marrying another! I said to myself: 'At this moment a pure, noble young girl is giving herself to him.' I said again: 'What oaths is that mouth, which

has so often pressed my lips, now taking?" Often since that dreadful misfortune I have asked heaven what crime I had committed that I should be so terribly punished? This was the crime: I remained your mistress, and your wife died. I only saw her once, and then scarcely for a minute, but she looked at you, and I knew that she loved you as only I could. Ah, Guy, it was our love that killed her!"

She stopped exhausted, but none of the bystanders moved. They listened breathlessly, and waited with feverish emotion for her to resume.

"Who," continued the sick woman, unconscious of all that was passing about her, "who told you I was deceiving you? Oh, the wretches! They set spies upon me; they discovered that an officer came frequently to see me. But that officer was my brother, my dear Louis! When he was eighteen years old, and being unable to obtain work, he enlisted, saying to my mother that there would then be one mouth the less in the family. He was a good soldier, and his officers always liked him. He was promoted a lieutenant, then captain, and finally became major. Louis always loved me; had he remained in Paris I should not have fallen. But our mother died, and I was left all alone in this great city. He was a non-commissioned officer when he first knew that I had a lover; and he was so enraged that I feared he would never forgive me. But he did forgive me, saying that my constancy in my error was its only excuse. Ah, my friend, he was more jealous of your honor than you yourself! He came to see me in secret, because I placed him in the unhappy position of blushing for his sister. Could a brave soldier confess that his sister was the mistress of a comte? That it might not be known, I took the utmost precautions, but alas! only to make you doubt me. When Louis knew what was said he wished in his blind rage to challenge you; and then I was obliged to make him think that he had no right to defend me. What misery! Ah, I have paid dearly for my years of stolen happiness! But you are here, and all is forgotten. For you do believe me, do you not, Guy? I will write to Louis: he will come, he will tell you that I do not lie, and you can not doubt his, a soldier's word."

"Yes, on my honor," said the old soldier, "what my sister says is the truth."

The dying woman did not hear him; she continued in a voice panting from weariness: "How your presence revives me. I

feel that I am growing stronger. I have nearly been very ill. I am afraid I am not very pretty to-day; but never mind, kiss me!" She opened her arms, and thrust out her lips as if to kiss him. "But it is one condition, Guy, that you will leave me my child? Oh! I beg of you, I entreat you, not to take him from me; leave him to me. What is a mother without her child? You are anxious to give him an illustrious name, an immense fortune. No! You tell me that this sacrifice will be for his good. No! My child is mine: I will keep him. The world has no honors, no riches, which can replace a mother's love. You wish to give me in exchange that other woman's child. Never! What! you would have that woman embrace my boy! It is impossible. Take away this strange child from me; he fills me with horror; I want my own! Ah, do not insist, do not threaten me with anger, do not leave me. I should give in, and then I should die. Guy, forget this fatal project, the thought of it alone is a crime. Can not my prayers, my tears, can nothing move you? Ah, well God will punish us. All will be discovered. The day will come when these children will demand a fearful reckoning. Guy, I foresee the future; I see my son coming toward me, justly angered. What does he say, great heaven! Oh, those letters, those letters, sweet memories of our love! My son, he threatens me! He strikes me! Ah, help! A son strike his mother. Tell no one of it, though. Oh, my God, what torture! Yet he knows well that I am his mother. He pretends not to believe me. Lord, this is too much! Guy! pardon! oh, my only friend! I have neither the power to resist nor the courage to obey you."

At this moment the door opening on to the landing opened, and Noel appeared, pale as usual, but calm and composed. The dying woman saw him, and the sight affected her like an electric shock. A terrible shudder shook her frame; her eyes grew inordinately large; her hair seemed to stand on end. She raised herself on her pillows, stretched out her arm in the direction where Noel stood, and in a loud voice exclaimed: "Assassin!"

She fell back convulsively on the bed. Some one hastened forward: she was dead. A deep silence prevailed. All the bystanders were deeply moved by this painful scene, this last confession, wrested so to say from the delirium. And the last word uttered by Madame Gerdy, "assassin," surprised no one. Ah, excepting the nun, knew of the awful accusation which had been made against Albert. To him they applied the unfortu-

nate mother's malediction. Noel seemed quite broken-hearted. Kneeling by the bedside of her who had been as a mother to him, he took one of her hands, and pressed it close to his lips. "Dead!" he groaned; "she is dead."

Fallen into a chair, his head thrown back, the Comte de Commarin was more overwhelmed and more livid than this dead woman, his old love, once so beautiful. Claire and the doctor hastened to assist him. They undid his cravat, and took off his collar, for he was suffocating. With the help of the old soldier, whose red, tearful eyes told of suppressed grief, they moved the comte's chair to the half-opened window to give him a little air. Three days before this scene would have killed him. But the heart hardens by misfortune, like hands by labor. "His tears have saved him," whispered the doctor to Claire.

M. de Commarin gradually recovered, and, as his thoughts became clearer, his sufferings returned. The comte's gaze was fixed upon the bed where lay Valerie's body. The soul, that soul so devoted and so tender, had flown. What would he not have given if God would have restored that unfortunate woman to life for a day, or even for an hour? Upon a mere suspicion, without deigning to inquire, without giving her a hearing, he had treated her with the coldest contempt. Why had he not seen her again? He would have spared himself twenty years of doubt as to Albert's birth. Then he remembered the comtesse's death. She also had loved him, and had died of her love. He had not understood them; he had killed them both. The hour of expiation had come; and he could not say: "Lord, the punishment is too great," and yet, what punishment, what misfortunes, during the last five days!

"Yes," he stammered, "she predicted it. Why did I not listen to her?" Madame Gerdy's brother pitied the old man, so severely tried. He held out his hand. "M. de Commarin," he said, in a grave, sad voice, "my sister forgave you long ago, even if she ever had any ill feeling against you. It is my turn to-day; I forgive you sincerely."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the comte, "thank you." And then he added: "What a death!"

"Yes," murmured Claire, "she breathed her last in the idea that her son was guilty of a crime. And we were not able to undeceive her."

"At least," cried the comte, "her son should be free to render her his last duties; yes, he must be. Noel!" The barrister had

approached his father, and heard all. "I have promised, father," he replied, "to save him."

For the first time, Mademoiselle d'Arlange was face to face with Noel. Their eyes met, and she could not restrain a movement of repugnance, which the barrister perceived. "Albert is already saved," she said proudly. "What we ask is that prompt justice shall be done him; that he shall be immediately set at liberty. The magistrate now knows the truth."

"How the truth?" exclaimed the barrister.

"Yes; Albert passed at my house, with me, the evening the crime was committed." Noel looked at her surprised; so singular a confession from such a mouth, without explanation, might well surprise him. She drew herself up haughtily. "I am Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange, sir," said she.

M. de Commarin now quickly ran over all the incidents reported by Claire. When he had finished, Noel replied: "You see, sir, my position at this moment, to-morrow—"

"To-morrow?" interrupted the comte, "you said, I believe, to-morrow! Honor demands, sir, that we act to-day, at this moment. You can show your love for this poor woman much better by delivering her son than by praying for her." Noel bowed low. "To hear your wish, sir, is to obey it," he said; "I go. This evening, at your house, I shall have the honor of giving you an account of my proceedings. Perhaps I shall be able to bring Albert with me."

He spoke, and, again embracing the dead woman, went out. Soon the comte and Mademoiselle d'Arlange also retired. The old soldier went to the Mairie, to give notice of the death, and to fulfil the necessary formalities. The nun alone remained to watch the corpse.



**M.** DABURON was ascending the stairs that led to the offices of the investigating magistrates, when he saw old Tabaret coming toward him. The sight pleased him, and he at once called out: "M. Tabaret!"

"You must excuse me, sir," he said, bowing, "but I am expected at home."

"I hope, however—"

"Oh, he is innocent," interrupted old Tabaret. "I have already some proofs; and before three days— But you are going to see Gevrol's man with the earrings. He is very cunning, Gevrol: I misjudged him." And without listening to another word, he hurried away. M. Daburon, greatly disappointed, also hastened on. In the passage, on a bench of rough wood before his office door, Albert sat awaiting him, under the charge of a Garde de Paris. "You will be summoned immediately, sir," said the magistrate to the prisoner, as he opened his door.

In the office, Constant was talking with a skinny little man. "You received my letters?" asked M. Daburon of his clerk. "Your orders have been executed, sir: the prisoner is without, and here is M. Martin, who this moment arrived from the neighborhood of the Invalides."

"That is well," said the magistrate in a satisfied tone. And, turning toward the detective: "Well, M. Martin," he asked, "what did you see?"—"The walls have been scaled, sir."—"Lately?"—"Five or six days ago."—"You are sure of this?"—"As sure as I am that I see M. Constant at this moment mending his pen."—"The marks are plain?"—"As plain as the nose on my face, sir. The thief entered the garden before the rain, and went away after it, as you had conjectured. This circumstance is easy to establish by examining the marks on the wall of the ascent and the descent on the side toward the street. These marks are several abrasions, evidently made by the feet of some one climbing. The first are clean; the others, muddy. The scamp in getting in pulled himself up by the strength of his wrists: but when going away, he enjoyed the luxury of a ladder, which he threw down as soon as he was on the top of the wall. One can see where he placed it, by holes made in the ground by the fellow's weight; and also by the mortar which has been knocked away from the top of the wall."

"Is that all?" asked the magistrate.

"Not yet, sir. Three of the pieces of glass which cover the top of the wall have been removed. Several of the acacia branches, which extend over the wall have been twisted or broken. Adhering to the thorns of one of these branches, I found this little piece of lavender kid, which appears to me to belong to a glove."

The magistrate eagerly seized the piece of kid. It had evidently come from a glove. "You took care, I hope, M. Martin," said M. Daburon, "not to attract attention at the house where you made this investigation?"

"Certainly, sir. I first of all examined the exterior of the wall at my leisure. After that, leaving my hat at a wine-shop round the corner, I called at the Marquise d'Arlange's house, pretending to be the servant of a neighboring duchess, who was in despair at having lost a favorite parrot. I was very kindly given permission to explore the garden; and, as I spoke as disrespectfully as possible of my pretended mistress, they, no doubt, took me for a genuine servant."

"You are an adroit and prompt fellow, M. Martin," interrupted the magistrate. "I am well satisfied with you; and I will report you favorably at headquarters." He rang his bell, while the detective, delighted at the praise he had received, moved backward to the door, bowing the while.

Albert was then brought in. "Have you decided, sir," asked the investigating magistrate without preamble, "to give me a true account of how you spent last Tuesday evening?"—"I have already told you, sir."—"No, sir, you have not; and I regret to say that you lied to me." Albert, at this apparent insult, turned red, and his eyes flashed.

"I know all that you did on that evening," continued the magistrate, "because justice, as I have already told you, is ignorant of nothing that it is important for it to know." Then, looking straight into Albert's eyes, he continued slowly: "I have seen Mademoiselle Claire d'Arlange."

On hearing that name, the prisoner's features, contracted by a firm resolve not to give way, relaxed. However, he made no reply.

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange," continued the magistrate, "has told me where you were on Tuesday evening." Albert still hesitated. "I am not setting a trap for you," added M. Daburon; "I give you my word of honor. She has told me all, you understand?"

This time Albert decided to speak. His explanations corresponded exactly with Claire's; not one detail more. Henceforth, doubt was impossible. Mademoiselle d'Arlange had not been imposed upon. Either Albert was innocent, or she was his accomplice. Could she knowingly be the accomplice of such an odious crime? No; she could not even be suspected of it.

But who then was the assassin? For, when a crime has been committed, justice demands a culprit.

"You see, sir," said the magistrate severely to Albert, "you did deceive me. You risked your life, sir, and, what is also very serious, you exposed me, you exposed justice, to the chance of committing a most deplorable mistake. Why did you not tell me the truth at once?"

"Mademoiselle d'Arlange, sir," replied Albert, "in according me a meeting, trusted in my honor."

"And you would have died sooner than mention that interview?" interrupted M. Daburon with a touch of irony. "That is all very fine, sir, and worthy of the days of chivalry!"

"I am not the hero that you suppose, sir," replied the prisoner simply. "If I told you that I did not count on Claire, I should be telling a falsehood. I was waiting for her. I knew that, on learning of my arrest, she would brave everything to save me. But her friends might have hid it from her; and that was what I feared. In that event, I do not think, so far as one can answer for one's self, that I should have mentioned her name."

There was no appearance of bravado. What Albert said, he thought and felt. M. Daburon regretted his irony. "Sir," he said kindly, "you must return to your prison. I can not release you yet; but you will be no longer in solitary confinement. You will be treated with every attention due to a prisoner whose innocence appears probable." Albert bowed, and thanked him; and was then removed.

"We are now ready for Gevrol," said the magistrate to his clerk. The chief of detectives was absent: he had been sent for from the Prefecture of Police; but his witness, the man with the earrings, was waiting in the passage. He was told to enter. He was one of those short, thick-set men, powerful as oaks, who can carry almost any weight on their broad shoulders. His white hair and whiskers set off his features, hardened and tanned by the inclemency of the weather, the sea winds and the heat of the tropics. He had large callous black hands, with big sinewy fingers which must have possessed the strength of a vise. Great earrings in the form of anchors hung from his ears. He was dressed in the costume of a well-to-do Normandy fisherman out for a holiday. The clerk was obliged to push him into the office, for this son of the ocean was timid and abashed when on shore. M. Daburon examined him, and esti-



mated him at a glance. There was no doubt but that he was the sunburnt man described by one of the witnesses at La Jonchere. It was also impossible to doubt his honesty.

"Your name?" demanded the investigating magistrate.—"Marie Pierre Lerouge."—"Are you, then, related to Claudine Lerouge?"—"I am her husband, sir."

"Every one believed her a widow. She herself pretended to be one."—"Yes, for in that way she partly excused her conduct. Besides, it was an arrangement between ourselves. I had told her that I would have nothing more to do with her."—"Indeed? Well, you know that she is dead, victim of an odious crime?"—"The detective who brought me here told me of it, sir," replied the sailor, his face darkening. "She was a wretch!" he added in a hollow voice.—"How? You, her husband, accuse her?"—"I have but too good reason to do so, sir. Ah, my dead father, who foresaw it all at the time, warned me! I laughed, when he said: 'Take care, or she will dishonor us all.' He was right. Through her, I have been hunted down by the police, just like some skulking thief. Everywhere that they inquired after me with their warrant, people must have said: 'Ah, ha, he has then committed some crime!' And here I am before a magistrate! Ah, sir, what a disgrace! The Lerouges have been honest people, from father to son, ever since the world began. Yes, she was a wicked woman; and I have often told her that she would come to a bad end."—"You told her that?"—"More than a hundred times, sir."—"When did you warn her so wisely?"

"Ah, a long time ago, sir," replied the sailor, "the first time was more than thirty years back. She had ambition even in her blood; she wished to mix herself up in the intrigues of the great. It was that that ruined her. She said that one got money for keeping secrets; and I said that one got disgraced and that was all. But she had a will of her own."

"You were her husband, though," objected M. Daburon, "you had the right to command her obedience." The sailor shook his head, and heaved a deep sigh. "Alas, sir! it was I who obeyed."

"In what intrigues did your wife mingle?" asked he. "Go on, my friend, tell me everything exactly; here, you know, we must have not only the truth, but the whole truth."

Lerouge placed his hat on a chair. Then he began alternately to pull his fingers, making them crack almost sufficiently

to break them, and ultimately scratched his head violently. It was his way of arranging his ideas. "I must tell you," he began, "that it will be thirty-five years on St. John's day since I fell in love with Claudine. She was a pretty, neat, fascinating girl, with a voice sweeter than honey. She was the most beautiful girl in our part of the country, straight as a mast, supple as a willow, graceful and strong as a racing boat. Her eyes sparkled like old cider; her hair was black, her teeth as white as pearls, and her breath was as fresh as the sea breeze. The misfortune was that she hadn't a sou, while we were in easy circumstances. Her mother, who was the widow of I can't say how many husbands, was, saving your presence, a bad woman, and my father was the worthiest man alive. When I spoke to the old fellow of marrying Claudine he swore fiercely, and eight days after, he sent me to Oporto on a schooner belonging to one of our neighbors, just to give me a change of air. I came back, at the end of six months, thinner than a thole, but more in love than ever. Recollections of Claudine scorched me like a fire. I could scarcely eat or drink; but I felt that she loved me a little in return, for I was a fine young fellow, and more than one girl had set her cap at me. Then my father, seeing that he could do nothing, that I was wasting away, and was on the road to join my mother in the cemetery, decided to let me complete my folly. So one evening, after we had returned from fishing and I got up from supper without tasting it, he said to me: 'Marry the hag's daughter, and let's have no more of this.' The evening after the wedding, and when the relatives and guests had departed, I was about to join my wife, when I perceived my father all alone in a corner weeping. The sight touched my heart, and I had a foreboding of evil; but it quickly passed away. For two years, in spite of a few little quarrels, everything went on nicely. Claudine managed me like a child. Ah, she was cunning! She might have seized and bound me, and carried me to market and sold me, without my noticing it. Her great fault was her love of finery. All that I earned, and my business was very prosperous, she put on her back. At the baptism of our son, who was called Jacques after my father, to please her, I squandered all I had economized during my youth, more than three hundred pistoles, with which I had intended purchasing a meadow that lay in the midst of our property. I was well enough pleased, until one morning I saw one of the Comte de Commarin's ser-

vants entering our house; the comte's chateau is only about a mile from where I lived on the other side of the town. It was a fellow named Germain, whom I didn't like at all. I asked my wife what the fellow wanted; she replied that he had come to ask her to take a child to nurse. I would not hear of it at first, for our means were sufficient to allow Claudine to keep all her milk for our own child. But she gave me the very best of reasons. She said she regretted her past flirtations and her extravagance. She wished to earn a little money, being ashamed of doing nothing while I was killing myself with work. She was to get a very good price, that we could save up to go toward the three hundred pistoles. That confounded meadow, to which she alluded, decided me."

"Did she not tell you of the commission with which she was charged?" asked the magistrate.

This question astonished Lerouge. He thought that there was good reason to say that justice sees and knows everything. "Not then," he answered; "but you will see. Eight days after, the postman brought a letter, asking her to go to Paris to fetch the child. It arrived in the evening. 'Very well,' said she, 'I will start to-morrow by the diligence.' I didn't say a word then; but next morning, when she about to take her seat in the diligence, I declared that I was going with her. She didn't seem at all angry, on the contrary. She kissed me, and I was delighted. At Paris she was to call for the little one at a Madame Gerdy's, who lived on the Boulevard. We arranged that she should go alone, while I waited for her at our inn. After she had gone, I grew uneasy. I went out soon after and prowled about near Madame Gerdy's house, making inquiries of the servants and others: I soon discovered that she was the Comte de Commarin's mistress. I felt so annoyed that, if I had been master, my wife should have come away without the little bastard. Claudine, sir, was more obstinate than a mule. After three days of violent discussion, she obtained from me a reluctant consent, between two kisses. Then she told me that we were going to return home by the diligence. The lady, who feared the fatigue of the journey for her child, had arranged that we should travel back by short stages, in her carriage, and drawn by her horses. For she was kept in grand style. We were, therefore, installed with the children, mine and the other, in an elegant carriage, drawn by magnificent animals, and driven by a coachman in livery. My wife was mad with joy; she

kissed me over and over again, and chinked handfuls of gold in my face. I felt as foolish as an honest husband who finds money in his house which he didn't earn himself. Seeing how I felt, Claudine, hoping to pacify me, resolved to tell me the whole truth. 'See here,' she said to me—"Lerouge stopped, and, changing his tone, said: "You understand that it is my wife who is speaking?"

"Yes, yes. Go on."—"She said to me, shaking her pocket full of money, 'See here, my man, we shall always have as much of this as ever we may want, and this is why: The comte, who also had a legitimate child at the same time as this bastard, wishes that this one shall bear his name instead of the other; and this can be accomplished, thanks to me. On the road we shall meet at the inn, where we are to sleep, M. Germain and the nurse to whom they have entrusted the legitimate son. We shall be put in the room, and during the night I am to change the little ones, who have been purposely dressed alike. For this the comte gives me eight thousand francs down and a life annuity of a thousand francs.' I could say nothing at first, I was so choked with rage. But she, who was generally afraid of me when I was in a passion, burst out laughing, and said: 'What a fool you are! Listen, before turning sour like a bowl of milk. The comte is the only one who wants this change made; and he is the one that's to pay for it. His mistress, this little one's mother, doesn't want it at all; she merely pretended to consent, so as not to quarrel with her lover, and because she has got a plan of her own. She took me aside during my visit in her room, and, after having made me swear secrecy on a crucifix, she told me that she couldn't bear the idea of separating herself from her babe forever, and of bringing up another's child. She added that, if I would agree not to change the children, and not to tell the comte, she would give me ten thousand francs down, and guarantee me an annuity equal to the one the comte had promised me. She declared, also, that she could easily find out whether I kept my word, as she had made a mark of recognition on her little one. She didn't show me the mark, and I have examined him carefully, but can't find it. Do you understand now. I merely take care of this little fellow here; I tell the comte that I have changed the children; we receive from both sides, and Jacques will be rich. Now kiss your little wife who has more sense than you, you old dear!' That, sir, is word for

word what Claudine said to me." M. Daburon was confounded. He felt himself utterly routed.

"What Claudine proposed to me," continued the sailor, "was villainous; and I am an honest man. She proved to me that we were wronging no one, that we were making little Jacques's fortune, and I was silenced. At evening we arrived at some village; and the coachman, stopping the carriage before an inn, told us we were to sleep there. We entered, and who do you think we saw? That scamp, Germain, with a nurse carrying a child dressed so exactly like the one we had that I was startled. They had journeyed there, like ourselves, in one of the comte's carriages. A suspicion crossed my mind. How could I be sure that Claudine had not invented the second story to pacify me? I resolved not to lose sight of the little bastard, swearing that they shouldn't change it; so I kept him all the evening on my knees, and, to be all the more sure, I tied my handkerchief about his waist. Ah! the plan had been well laid. After supper some one spoke of retiring, and then it turned out that there were only two double-bedded rooms in the house. It seemed as though it had been built expressly for the scheme. The innkeeper said that the two nurses might sleep in one room, and Germain and myself in the other. Do you understand, sir? Add to this that during the evening I had surprised looks of intelligence passing between my wife and that rascally servant, and you can imagine how furious I was. It was conscience that spoke, and I was trying to silence it. As for me, I upset that arrangement, pretending to be too jealous to leave my wife a minute. They were obliged to give way to me. The other nurse went up to bed first. Claudine and I followed soon afterward. My wife undressed and got into bed with our son and the little bastard. I did not undress. Under the pretext that I should be in the way of the children, I installed myself in a chair near the bed, determined not to shut my eyes, and to keep close watch. I put out the candle, in order to let the women sleep. Toward midnight I heard Claudine moving. I held my breath. Was she going to change the children? I was beside myself, and seizing her by the arm, I commenced to beat her roughly, giving free vent to all that I had on my heart. The other nurse cried out as though she were being murdered. At this uproar Germain rushed in with a lighted candle. Not knowing what I was doing, I drew from my pocket a long Spanish knife, which I always carried, and, seizing the cursed

bastard, I thrust the blade through his arm, crying, "This way, at least, he can't be changed without my knowing it; he is marked for life!"

The magistrate's stern glance harassed Lerouge, and urged him on, like the whip which flogs the negro slave overcome with fatigue.

"The little fellow's wound," he resumed, "bled dreadfully, and he might have died; but I didn't think of that. I was only troubled about the future. I declared that I would write out all that had occurred, and that every one should sign it. This was done; we could, all four, write. Germain didn't dare resist, for I spoke with knife in hand. He wrote his name first, begging me to say nothing about it to the comte, swearing that, for his part, he would never breathe a word of it, and pledging the other nurse to a like secrecy."

"And have you kept this paper?" asked M. Daburon.

"Yes, sir, and as the detective to whom I confessed all advised me to bring it with me, I went to take it from the place where I always kept it, and I have it here."—"Give it to me."

Lerouge took from his coat pocket an old parchment pocket-book, fastened with a leather thong, and withdrew from it a paper yellowed by age and carefully sealed. "Here it is," said he. "The paper hasn't been opened since that accursed night." It was really a brief description of the scene, described by the old sailor. The four signatures were there. "What has become of the witnesses who signed this declaration?" murmured the magistrate, speaking to himself. Lerouge replied: "Germain is dead. I have been told that he was drowned while out rowing. Claudine has just been assassinated; but the other nurse still lives. I even know that she spoke of the affair to her husband, for he hinted as much to me. His name is Brossette, and he lives in the village of Commarin itself."

"And what next?" asked the magistrate after having taking down the name and address.

"The next day, sir, Claudine managed to pacify me, and extorted a promise of secrecy. The child was scarcely ill at all; but he retained an enormous scar on his arm."—"Was Madame Gerdy informed of what took place?"—"I do not think so, sir. But I would rather say that I do not know."—"What! you do not know?"—"Yes, sir, I swear it. You see my ignorance comes from what happened afterward."—"What happened, then?"—"The sailor hesitated. "That, sir, concerns only myself, and—"

"My friend," interrupted the magistrate, "you are an honest man, I believe; in fact, I am sure of it. All that is said here, and which is not directly connected with the crime, will remain secret; even I will forget it immediately."

"Alas, sir," answered the sailor, "I have been already greatly punished; and it is a long time since my troubles began. Claudine was a coquette; but she had a great many other vices. When she realized how much money we had these vices showed themselves, just like a fire, smoldering at the bottom of the hold, bursts forth when you open the hatches. In our house there was feasting without end. Whenever I went to sea she would entertain the worst women in the place; and there was nothing too good or too expensive for them. Well, one night, when she thought me at Rouen, I returned unexpectedly. I entered, and found her with a man. A miserable-looking wretch—the bailiff's clerk. I should have killed him, like the vermin that he was; it was my right, but he was such a pitiful object. I took him by the neck and pitched him out of the window, without opening it. It didn't kill him. Then I fell upon my wife and beat her until she couldn't stir. I pardoned her, but the man who beats his wife and then pardons her is lost. In the future she took better precautions, became a greater hypocrite, and that was all. In the mean while Madame Gerdy took back her child, and Claudine had nothing more to restrain her. My house became the resort of all the good-for-nothing rogues in the country, for whom my wife brought out bottles of wine and brandy whenever I was away at sea, and they got drunk promiscuously. When money failed, she wrote to the comte or his mistress, and the orgies continued. It was a cursed life. My neighbors despised me, and turned their backs on me; they believed me an accomplice or a willing dupe. People wondered where all the money came from that was spent in my house. Fortunately, though, my poor father was dead."

M. Daburon pitied the speaker sincerely. "Rest a while, my friend," he said; "compose yourself."

"No," replied the sailor, "I would rather get through with it quickly. One man, the priest, had the charity to tell me of it. Without losing a minute, I went and saw a lawyer. He said that nothing could be done. When once a man has given his name to a woman, he told me, he can not take it back; it belongs to her for the rest of her days, and she has a right to

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dispose of it. She may sully it, cover it with mire, drag it from wine-shop to wine-shop, and her husband can do nothing. That same day, I sold the fatal meadow, and sent the proceeds of it to Claudine, wishing to keep nothing of the price of shame. I then had a document drawn up, authorizing her to administer our property, but not allowing her either to sell or mortgage it. Then I wrote her a letter in which I told her that she need never expect to hear of me again, that I was nothing more to her, and that she might look upon herself as a widow. That same night I went away with my son."

"And what became of your wife after your departure?"—"I can not say, sir; I only know that she quitted the neighborhood a year after I did."—"You have never lived with her since?"—"Never."—"But you were at her house three days before the crime was committed."—"That is true, but it was absolutely necessary. I had had much trouble to find her, no one knew what had become of her. Fortunately my notary was able to procure Madame Gerdy's address; he wrote to her, and that is how I learned that Claudine was living at La Jonchere. I was then at Rouen. Captain Gervais, who is a friend of mine, offered to take me to Paris on his boat, and I accepted. Ah, sir, what a shock I experienced when I entered her house! My wife did not know me! By constantly telling every one that I was dead, she had without a doubt ended by believing it herself. When I told her my name, she fell back in her chair. The wretched woman had not changed in the least; she had by her side a glass and a bottle of brandy."—"All this doesn't explain why you went to seek your wife."—"It was on Jacques's account, sir, that I went. The youngster has grown to be a man; and he wants to marry. For that, his mother's consent was necessary; and I was taking to Claudine a document which the notary had drawn up, and which she signed. This is it."

M. Daburon took the paper, and appeared to read it attentively. After a moment he asked: "Have you thought who could have assassinated your wife?" Lerouge made no reply. "Do you suspect any one?" persisted the magistrate.—"Well, sir," replied the sailor, "what can I say? I thought that Claudine had wearied out the people from whom she drew money, like water from a well; or else getting drunk one day, she had blabbed too freely."

The testimony being as complete as possible, M. Daburon dismissed Lerouge, at the same time telling him to wait for Gevrol,



who would take him to a hotel, where he might wait, at the disposal of justice, until further orders. "All your expenses will be paid you," added the magistrate.

M. Daburon, usually the most prudent of men, had considered as simple one of the most complex of cases. He had acted in a mysterious crime, which demanded the utmost caution, as carelessly as though it were a case of simple misdemeanor. Why? Because his memory had not left him his free deliberation, judgment, and discernment. Thinking himself sure of his facts, he had been carried away by his animosity. The singular part of it all was that the magistrate's faults sprang from his very honesty. The scruples which troubled him had filled his mind with phantoms, and had prompted in him the passionate animosity he had displayed at a certain moment. Calmer now, he examined the case more soundly. As a whole, thank heaven! there was nothing done which could not be repaired. At that moment he resolved that he would never undertake another investigation. His profession henceforth inspired him with an unconquerable loathing. Too pious a man to think of suicide, he asked himself with anguish what would become of him when he threw aside his magistrate's robes. Then he turned again to the business in hand. In any case, innocent or guilty, Albert was really the Vicomte de Commarin, the comte's legitimate son. But was he guilty? Evidently he was not. "I think," exclaimed M. Daburon suddenly, "I must speak to the Comte de Commarin. Constant, send to his house a message for him to come here at once; if he is not at home, he must be sought for."

M. Daburon felt that an unpleasant duty was before him. He would be obliged to say to the old nobleman: "Sir, your legitimate son is not Noel, but Albert." As a compensation, though, he could tell him that Albert was innocent. To Noel he would also have to tell the truth: hurl him to earth, after having raised him among the clouds. What a blow it would be! But, without doubt, the comte would make him some compensation; at least, he ought to.

"Now," murmured the magistrate, "who can be the criminal?"



**O**LD TABARET talked, but he acted also. Lavish with his money, the old fellow had gathered together a dozen detectives on leave or rogues out of work; and at the head of these worthy assistants, seconded by his friend Lecoq, he had gone to Bougival. He had actually searched the country, house by house, with the obstinacy and the patience of a maniac hunting for a needle in a haystack.

After three days' investigation, he felt comparatively certain that the assassin had not left the train at Rueil, as all the people of Bougival, La Jonchere, and Marly do, but had gone on as far as Chatou. Tabaret thought he recognized him in a man described to him by the porters at that station as rather young, dark, and with black whiskers, carrying an overcoat and an umbrella. This person, who arrived by the train which left Paris for St. Germain at thirty-five minutes past eight in the evening, had appeared to be in a very great hurry. On quitting the station, he had started off at a rapid pace on the road which led to Bougival. Upon the way, two men from Marly and a woman from La Malmaison had noticed him on account of his rapid pace. He smoked as he hurried along. On crossing the bridge which joins the two banks of the Seine at Bougival, he had been still more noticed. It is usual to pay a toll on crossing this bridge; and the supposed assassin had apparently forgotten this circumstance. He passed without paying, keeping up his rapid pace, pressing his elbows to his side, husbanding his breath, and the gatekeeper was obliged to run after him for his toll. He seemed greatly annoyed, threw the man a ten-sou piece, and hurried on, without waiting for the nine sous change. Nor was that all. The station-master at Rueil remembered that, two minutes before the quarter-past ten train came up, a passenger arrived very agitated, and so out of breath that he could scarcely ask for a second-class ticket for Paris. The appearance of this man corresponded exactly with the description given of him by the porters at

Chatou, and by the gatekeeper at the bridge. Finally, the old man thought he was on the track of some one who entered the same carriage as the breathless passenger. He had been told of a baker living at Asnieres, and he had written to him, asking him to call at his house.

Such was old Tabaret's information, when on the Monday morning he called at the Palais de Justice, in order to find out if the record of Widow Lerouge's past life had been received. He found that nothing had arrived, but in the passage he met Gevrol and his man. The chief of detectives was triumphant, and showed it too. As soon as he saw Tabaret, he called out: "Well, my illustrious mare's-nest hunter, what news? Have you had any more scoundrels guillotined since the other day?"

Instead of retaliating, he bowed his head in such a penitent manner that Gevrol was astonished. "Jeer at me, my good M. Gevrol," he replied, "mock me without pity; you are right, I deserve it all."

"Ah, come now," said the chief, "have you then performed some new masterpiece, you impetuous old fellow?" Old Tabaret shook his head sadly. "I have delivered up an innocent man," he said, "and justice will not restore him his freedom."

Gevrol was delighted, and rubbed his hands until he almost wore away the skin. "This is fine," he sang out, "this is capital. To bring criminals to justice is of no account at all. But to free the innocent, by Jove! that is the last touch of art. Tirauclair, you are a great wonder; and I bow before you." And at the same time, he raised his hat ironically.

"Don't crush me," replied the old fellow. "Because chance served me three or four times, I became foolishly proud! Instead of laughing, pray help me, aid me with your advice and your experience. Alone, I can do nothing, while with your assistance—I" Gevrol was vain in the highest degree. Tabaret's submission tickled his pretensions as a detective immensely; for in reality he thought the old man very clever. He was softened. "I suppose," he said patronizingly, "you refer to the La Jonchere affair?"

"Alas! yes, my dear M. Gevrol, I wished to work without you, and I got myself into a pretty mess." Cunning old Tabaret kept his countenance as penitent as that of a sacristan caught eating meat on a Friday; but he was inwardly laughing and rejoicing all the while. "Conceited fool!" he thought, "I will flatter you so much that you will end by doing everything

I want." M. Gevrol rubbed his nose, put out his lower lip, and said, "Ah,—hem!" He pretended to hesitate; but it was only because he enjoyed prolonging the old amateur's discomfiture. "Come," said he at last, "cheer up, old Tiraucclair. I'm a good fellow at heart, and I'll give you a lift. But, to-day, I'm too busy, I've an appointment to keep. Come to me to-morrow morning, and we'll talk it over. Do you know who that witness is that I've brought?"—"No; but tell me, my good M. Gevrol."—"Well, that fellow on the bench there, who is waiting for M. Daburon, is the husband of the victim of the La Jonchere tragedy!"—"Is it possible?" exclaimed old Tabaret, perfectly astounded. Then, after reflecting a moment, he added; "You are joking with me."—"No, upon my word. Go and ask him his name; he will tell you that it is Pierre Lerouge."—"She wasn't a widow then?"—"It appears not," replied Gevrol sarcastically, "since there is her happy spouse."—"Whew!" muttered the old fellow. "And does he know anything?" In a few sentences, the chief of detectives related to his amateur colleague the story that Lerouge was about to tell the investigating magistrate. "What do you say to that?" he asked when he came to the end.—"What do I say?" stammered M. Tabaret. "I don't say anything. But I think—no, I don't even think."—"A slight surprise, eh?" said Gevrol, beaming.—"Say rather an immense one," replied Tabaret. But suddenly he started, and gave his forehead a hard blow with his fist. "And my baker!" he cried, "I will see you to-morrow, then, M. Gevrol."—"He is crazed," thought the head detective. The old fellow was sane enough, but he had suddenly recollected the Asnieres baker, whom he had asked to call at his house. Would he still find him there? Going down stairs he met M. Daburon; but, as one has already seen, he hardly deigned to reply to him. He was soon outside, and trotted off along the quays. "Now," said he to himself, "let us consider. Noel is once more plain Noel Gerdy. He won't feel very pleased, for he thought so much of having a great name. Pshaw! if he likes, I'll adopt him. Tabaret doesn't sound so well as Commarin, but it's at least a name. Anyhow, Gevrol's story in no way affected Albert's situation or my convictions. He is the legitimate son, so much the better for him! That, however, would not prove his innocence to me, if I doubted it. He evidently knew nothing of these surprising circumstances, any more than his father. He must have believed as well as the

comte in the substitution having taken place. Madame Gerdy, too, must have been ignorant of these facts; they probably invented some story to explain the scar. Yes, but Madame Gerdy certainly knew that Noel was really her son, for when he was returned to her, she no doubt looked for the mark she had made on him. Then, when Noel discovered the comte's letters, she must have hastened to explain to him—"Old Tabaret stopped as suddenly as if further progress were obstructed by some dangerous reptile. He was terrified at the conclusion he had reached. "Noel, then, must have assassinated Widow Lerouge, to prevent her confessing that the substitution had never taken place, and have burned the letters and papers which proved it!" But he repelled this supposition with horror, as every honest man drives away a detestable thought which by accident enters his mind. "Suspect Noel, my boy, my sole heir, the personification of virtue and honor! Men of his class must indeed be moved by terrible passions to cause them to shed blood; and I have always known Noel to have but two passions, his mother and his profession. And I dare even to breathe a suspicion against this noble soul? I ought to be whipped!"

He at length reached the Rue St. Lazare. Before the door of his house stood a magnificent horse harnessed to an elegant blue brougham. At the sight of these he stopped. "A handsome animal!" he said to himself; "my tenants receive some swell people."

They apparently received visitors of an opposite class also, for, at that moment, he saw M. Clergot come out; worthy M. Clergot, whose presence in a house betrayed ruin just as surely as the presence of the undertakers announce a death. He stopped him and said. "Halloa! you old crocodile, you have clients, then, in my house?"

"So it seems," replied Clergot dryly.

"Who the deuce are you ruining now?"

"I am ruining no one," replied M. Clergot with an air of offended dignity. "Have you ever had reason to complain of me whenever we have done business together? I think not. Mention me to the young barrister up there if you like; he will tell you whether he has reason to regret knowing me."

These words produced a painful impression on Tabaret. What, Noel, the prudent Noel, one of Clergot's customers! What did it mean? Perhaps there was no harm in it; but

then he remembered the fifteen thousand francs he had lent Noel on the Thursday. "Yes," said he, wishing to obtain some more information, "I know that M. Gerdy spends a pretty round sum."

"It isn't he personally," Clergot objected, "who makes the money dance; it's that charming little woman of his. Ah, she's no bigger than your thumb, but she'd eat the devil, hoofs, horns, and all!"

What! Noel had a mistress, a woman whom Clergot himself, the friend of such creatures, considered expensive! The revelation, at such a moment, pierced the old man's heart. A gesture, a look, might awaken the usurer's mistrust, and close his mouth. "That's well known," replied Tabaret in a careless tone. "But what do you suppose the wench costs him a year?"

"Oh, I don't know! According to my calculation, she must have, during the four years that she has been under his protection, cost him close upon five hundred thousand francs."

Four years! Five hundred thousand francs! These words, these figures, burst like bombshells on old Tabaret's brain! Half a million! In that case, Noel was utterly ruined. But then—"It is a great deal," said he, succeeding by desperate efforts in hiding his emotion; "it is enormous. M. Gerdy, however, has resources."

"He!" interrupted the usurer, shrugging his shoulders. "Not even that!" he added, snapping his fingers; "he is utterly cleared out. But, if he owes you money, do not be anxious. He is a sly dog. He is going to be married; and I have just renewed bills of his for twenty-six thousand francs. Good-by, M. Tabaret."

The usurer hurried away, leaving the poor old fellow standing like a milestone in the middle of the pavement. And yet such was his confidence in Noel that he again struggled with his reason to resist the suspicions which tormented him. And supposing it were true? Have not many men done just such insane things for women without ceasing to be honest?

As he was about to enter his house a pretty young brunette came out and jumped as lightly as a bird into the blue brougham. Old Tabaret was a gallant man, and the young woman was most charming, but he never even looked at her. He passed in, and found his concierge standing, cap in hand, and tenderly examining a twenty-franc piece.

"Ah, sir," said the man, "such a pretty young person, and

so lady-like! If you had only been here five minutes sooner."—"What lady? why?"—"That elegant lady who just went out, sir; she came to make some inquiries about M. Gerdy. She gave me twenty francs for answering her questions. It seems that the gentleman is going to be married; and she was evidently much annoyed about it. Superb creature! I have an idea that she is his mistress. I know now why he goes out every night."—"M. Gerdy?"—"Yes, sir, but I never mentioned it to you because he seemed to wish to hide it. He never asks me to open the door for him, no, not he. He slips out by the little stable door. I have often said to myself: 'Perhaps he doesn't want to disturb me; it is very thoughtful on his part.'"

The concierge spoke with his eyes fixed on the gold piece. When he raised his head to examine the countenance of his lord and master, old Tabaret had disappeared.

Old Tabaret was running after the lady in the blue brougham. "She will tell me all," he thought, and with a bound he was in the street. He reached it just in time to see the blue brougham turn the corner of the Rue St. Lazare. "Heavens!" he murmured. "I shall lose sight of her, and yet she can tell me the truth." He ran to the end of the Rue St. Lazare as rapidly as if he had been a young man of twenty. Joy! He saw the blue brougham a short distance from him in the Rue du Havre, stopped in the midst of a block of carriages. "I have her," he said to himself. He looked all about him, but there was not an empty cab to be seen. The brougham got out of the entanglement and started off rapidly toward the Rue Tronchet. The old fellow followed. While running in the middle of the street, at the same time looking out for a cab, he kept saying to himself: "Hurry on, old fellow, hurry on."

But he was plainly losing ground. He was only half-way down the Rue Tronchet, and the brougham had almost reached the Madeleine. At last an open cab, going in the same direction as himself, passed by. He made a supreme effort, and with a bound jumped into the vehicle without touching the step. "There," he gasped, "that blue brougham, twenty francs!"

"All right!" replied the coachman, nodding.

As for old Tabaret, he was a long time recovering himself, his strength was almost exhausted. They were soon on the Boulevards. He stood up in the cab leaning against the driver's seat. "I don't see the brougham anywhere," he said.—"Oh, I see it all right, sir. But it is drawn by a splendid horse!"—

"Yours ought to be a better one. I said twenty francs; I'll make it forty." The driver whipped up his horse most mercilessly, and growled. "It's no use, I must catch her. Forty francs! I wonder how such an ugly man can be so jealous."

Old Tabaret tried in every way to occupy his mind with other matters. He wished to reflect before seeing the woman, speaking with her, and carefully questioning her. He was sure that by one word she would either condemn or save her lover. The idea that Noel was the assassin harassed and tormented him, and buzzed in his brain, like the moth which flies again and again against the window where it sees a light. As they passed the Chaussee d'Antin, the brougham was scarcely thirty paces in advance. The cab driver turned and said: "The brougham is stopping."—"Then stop also. Don't lose sight of it; but be ready to follow it again as soon as it goes off."

Old Tabaret leaned as far as he could out of the cab. The young woman alighted, crossed the pavement, and entered a shop where cashmeres and laces were sold. "There," thought the old fellow, "is where the thousand-franc notes go! Half a million in four years!"

The cab moved on once more, but soon stopped again. The brougham had made a fresh pause, this time in front of a curiosity shop. "The woman wants to buy all Paris!" said old Tabaret to himself in a passion. "Yes, if Noel committed the crime, it was she who forced him to it. These are my fifteen thousand francs that she is frittering away now. It must have been for money, then, that Noel murdered Widow Lerouge. If so, he is the lowest, the most infamous of men! 'And to think that he would be my heir if I should die here of rage! For it is written in my will in so many words, 'I bequeath to my son, Noel Gerdy!' But is this woman never going home?" The woman was in no hurry. She visited three or four more shops, and at last stopped at a confectioner's, where she remained for more than a quarter of an hour. The old fellow, devoured by anxiety, moved about and stamped in his cab. He was dying to rush after her, to seize her by the arm, and cry out to her: "Don't you know that at this moment your lover, he whom you have ruined, is suspected of an assassination?"

She returned to her carriage. It started off once more, passed up the Rue de Faubourg Montmartre, turned into the Rue de



Provence, deposited its fair freight at her own door, and drove away.

Tabaret, with a sigh of relief, got out of the cab, gave the driver his forty francs, bade him wait, and followed in the young woman's footsteps. "The old fellow is patient," thought the driver; "and the little brunette is caught."

The detective opened the door of the concierge's lodge. "What is the name of the lady who just came in?" he demanded. The concierge did not seem disposed to reply. "Her name!" insisted the old man. The tone was so sharp, so imperative, that the concierge was upset. "Madame Juliette Chafour," he answered.

"On what floor does she reside?"—"On the second, the door opposite the stairs."

A minute later the old man was waiting in Madame Juliette's drawing-room. Madame was dressing, the maid informed him, and would be down directly. Tabaret was astonished at the luxury of the room. There was nothing flaring or coarse, or in bad taste. The old fellow, who knew a good deal about such things, saw that everything was of great value. The ornaments on the mantelpiece alone must have cost, at the lowest estimate, twenty thousand francs. "Clergot," thought he, "didn't exaggerate a bit."

Juliette's entrance disturbed his reflections. She had taken off her dress and had hastily thrown about her a loose black dressing-gown, trimmed with cherry-colored satin.

"You wished, sir, to speak with me?" she inquired, bowing gracefully.—"Madame," replied M. Tabaret, "I am a friend of Noel Gerdy's; I may say, his best friend, and—"

"Pray sit down, sir," interrupted the young woman.

She placed herself on a sofa, just showing the tips of her little feet encased in slippers matching her dressing-gown, while the old man sat down in a chair. "I come, madame," he resumed, "on very serious business. Your presence at M. Gerdy's."—"Ah," cried Juliette, "he already knows of my visit? Then he must employ a detective."

"My dear child—" began Tabaret, paternally.—"Oh! I know, sir, what your errand is. Noel has sent you here to scold me. He forbade my going to his house, but I couldn't help it. It's annoying to have a puzzle for a lover, a man whom one knows nothing whatever about, a riddle in a black coat and a white cravat."

"You have been imprudent."—"Why? Because he is going to get married? Why does he not admit it then?"—"Suppose that it is not true."—"Oh, but it is! He told that old shark Clergot so, who repeated it to me. For the last month he has been so peculiar; he has changed so that I hardly recognize him."

Old Tabaret was especially anxious to know whether Noel had prepared an alibi for the evening of the crime. For him that was the grand question. If he had, he was certainly guilty; if not, he might still be innocent. Madame Juliette, he had no doubt, could enlighten him on that point. Consequently he had presented himself with his lesson all prepared, his little trap all set. The young woman's outburst disconcerted him a little; but trusting to the chances of conversation, he resumed. "Will you oppose Noel's marriage, then?"—"His marriage!" cried Juliette, bursting out into a laugh; "ah, the poor boy! If he meets no worse obstacle than myself, his path will be smooth. Let him marry by all means, the sooner the better, and let me hear no more of him."—"You don't love him, then?" asked the old fellow, surprised at this amiable frankness.

"Listen, sir. I have loved him a great deal, but everything has an end. For four years, I, who am so fond of pleasure, have passed an intolerable existence. If Noel doesn't leave me, I shall be obliged to leave him. I am tired of having a lover who is ashamed of me and who despises me."

"If he despises you, my pretty lady, he scarcely shows it here," replied old Tabaret, casting a significant glance about the room.

"You mean," she said, rising, "that he spends a great deal of money on me. It's true. He pretends that he has ruined himself on my account; it's very possible. But what's that to me! I would much have preferred less money and more regard. My extravagance has been inspired by anger and want of occupation. M. Gerdy treats me like a mercenary woman; and so I act like one. We are quits."

"You know very well that he worships you."—"He? I tell you he is ashamed of me. He hides me as though I were some horrible disease. You are the first of his friends to whom I have ever spoken. Why, no longer ago than last Tuesday, we went to the theatre! He hired an entire box. But do you think that he sat in it with me? Not at all. He slipped

away and I saw no more of him the whole evening."—"How so? Were you obliged to return home alone?"

"No. At the end of the play, toward midnight, he deigned to reappear. We had arranged to go to the masked ball at the Opera and then to have some supper. At the ball, he didn't dare to let down his hood, or take off his mask. At supper, I had to treat him like a perfect stranger, because some of his friends were present." This, then, was the alibi prepared in case of trouble. Juliette, had she been less carried away by her own feelings, would have noticed old Tabaret's emotion, and would certainly have held her tongue. He was perfectly livid, and trembled like a leaf. "Well," he said, making a great effort to utter the words, "the supper, I suppose, was none the less gay for that."

"Gay!" echoed the young woman, shrugging her shoulders; "you do not seem to know much of your friend. If you ever ask him to dinner, take good care not to give him anything to drink. Wine makes him as merry as a funeral procession. At the second bottle, he was more tipsy than a cork; so much so that he lost nearly everything he had with him: his overcoat, purse, umbrella, cigar-case—"

Old Tabaret couldn't sit and listen any longer; he jumped to his feet like a raving madman. "Miserable wretch!" he cried, "infamous scoundrel! It is he; but I have him!" And he rushed out, leaving Juliette so terrified that she called her maid. "Child," said she, "I have just made some awful blunder, have let some secret out. The old rogue was no friend of Noel's, he came to circumvent me, to lead me by the nose; and he succeeded. Without knowing it, I must have spoken against Noel. I have thought carefully, and can remember nothing; but he must be warned though. I will write him a line, while you find a messenger to take it."

Old Tabaret was soon in his cab and hurrying toward the Prefecture of Police. Noel an assassin! He thirsted for vengeance; he asked himself what punishment would be great enough for the crime. "For he not only assassinated Claudine," thought he, "but he so arranged the whole thing as to have an innocent man accused and condemned. And who can say that he did not kill his poor mother? It is clear that the wretch forgot his things at the railway station, in his haste to rejoin his mistress. If he has had the prudence to go boldly, and ask for them under a false name, I can see no further proofs against him."

The hussy, seeing her lover in danger, will deny what she has just told me: she will assert that Noel left her long after ten o'clock. But I can not think he has dared to go to the railway station again."

About half-way down the Rue Richelieu, M. Tabaret was seized with a sudden giddiness. "I am going to have an attack, I fear," thought he. "If I die, Noel will escape, and will be my heir. A man should always keep his will constantly with him, to be able to destroy it, if necessary."

A few steps further on, he saw a doctor's plate on a door; he stopped the cab, and rushed into the house. He was so excited, so beside himself, his eyes had such a wild expression, that the doctor was almost afraid of his peculiar patient, who said to him hoarsely: "Bleed me!" The doctor ventured an objection; but already the old fellow had taken off his coat, and drawn up one of his shirt-sleeves. "Bleed me!" he repeated. "Do you want me to die?" The doctor finally obeyed, and old Tabaret came out quieted and relieved.

An hour later, armed with the necessary power, and accompanied by a policeman, he proceeded to the lost property office at the St. Lazare railway station, to make the necessary search. He learned that, on the evening of Shrove Tuesday there had been found in one of the second-class carriages, of train No. 45, an overcoat and an umbrella. In one of the pockets of the overcoat he found a pair of lavender kid gloves, frayed and soiled, as well as a return ticket from Chatou, which had not been used. "Onward," he cried at last. "Now to arrest him." And, without losing an instant, he hastened to the Palais de Justice, where he hoped to find the investigating magistrate. Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, M. Daburon was still in his office. He was conversing with the Comte de Commarin.

Old Tabaret entered like a whirlwind. "Sir," he cried, stuttering with suppressed rage, "we have discovered the real assassin! It is my adopted son, my heir, Noel! A warrant is necessary at once. If we lose a minute, he will slip through our fingers. He will know that he is discovered, if his mistress has time to warn him of my visit. Hasten, sir, hasten!" M. Daburon opened his lips to ask an explanation; but the old defective continued: "That is not all. An innocent man, Albert, is still in prison."

"He will not be so an hour longer," replied the magistrate; "a moment before your arrival, I had made arrangements to

have him released. We must now occupy ourselves with the other one." Neither old Tabaret nor M. Daburon had noticed the disappearance of the Comte de Commarin. On hearing Noel's name mentioned, he gained the door quietly, and rushed out into the passage.



NOEL had promised to use every effort, to attempt even the impossible, to obtain Albert's release. He in fact did interview the Public Prosecutor and some members of the bar, but managed to be repulsed everywhere. At four o'clock, he called at the Comte de Commarin's house, to inform his father of the ill success of his efforts. "The comte has gone out," said Denis; "but if you will take the trouble to wait."—"I will wait," answered Noel.—"Then," replied the valet, "will you please follow me? I have the comte's orders to show you into his private room."

This confidence gave Noel an idea of his new power. He was at home, henceforth, in that magnificent house, he was the master, the heir! His glance, which wandered over the entire room, noticed the genealogical tree, hanging on the wall. He approached it, and read. It was like a page, and one of the most illustrious, taken from the golden book of French nobility. A warm glow of pride filled the barrister's heart, his pulse beat quicker, he raised his head haughtily, as he murmured: "Vicomte de Commarin!" The door opened. He turned, and saw the comte entering. As Noel was about to bow respectfully, he was petrified by the look of hatred, anger, and contempt on his father's face. A shiver ran through his veins; his teeth chattered; he felt that he was lost.

"Wretch!" cried the comte. And, dreading his own violence, the old nobleman threw his cane into a corner. He was unwilling to strike his son; he considered him unworthy of being struck by his hand. Then there was a moment of mortal silence, which seemed to both of them a century. Noel had the courage to speak first. "Sir," he began.—"Silence!" exclaimed

the comte hoarsely. "Can it be that you are my son? Alas, I can not doubt it now! Wretch! you knew well that you were Madame Gerdy's son. Infamous villain! you not only committed this murder, but you did everything to cause an innocent man to be charged with your crime! Parricide! you have also killed your mother." The barrister attempted to stammer forth a protest. "You killed her," continued the comte with increased energy, "if not by poison, at least by your crime. I understand all now: she was not delirious this morning. But you know as well as I do what she was saying. You were listening, and, if you dared to enter at that moment when one word more would have betrayed you, it was because you had calculated the effect of your presence. It was to you that she addressed her last word: 'Assassin!'"

Little by little, Noel had retired to the end of the room, and he stood leaning against the wall, his head thrown back, his hair on end, his look haggard. His face betrayed a terror most horrible to see, the terror of the criminal found out.

"I know all, you see," continued the comte; "and I am not alone in my knowledge. At this moment, a warrant of arrest is issued against you." A cry of rage like a hollow rattle burst from the barrister's breast. His lips, which were hanging through terror, now grew firm. Overwhelmed in the very midst of his triumph, he struggled against this fright. He drew himself up with a look of defiance. M. de Commarin, without seeming to pay any attention to Noel, approached his writing-table, and opened a drawer. "My duty," said he, "would be to leave you to the executioner who awaits you; but I remember that I have the misfortune to be your father. Sit down; write and sign a confession of your crime. You will then find firearms in this drawer. May heaven forgive you!"

The old nobleman moved toward the door. Noel with a sign stopped him, and drawing at the same time a revolver from his pocket, he said: "Your firearms are needless, sir; my precautions, as you see, are already taken; they will never catch me alive. Only—"—"Only?" repeated the comte harshly.—"I must tell you, sir," continued the barrister coldly, "that I do not choose to kill myself—at least not at present."—"Ah!" cried M. de Commarin in disgust, "you are a coward!"—"No, sir, not a coward; but I will not kill myself until I am sure that every opening is closed against me, that I can not save myself."

"Miserable wretch!" said the comte, threateningly, "must I

then do it myself?" He moved toward the drawer, but Noel closed it with a kick. "Listen to me, sir," said he, in that hoarse, quick tone, which men use in moments of imminent danger, "do not let us waste in vain words the few moments' respite left me. I have committed a crime, it is true, and I do not attempt to justify it; but who laid the foundation of it, if not yourself? Now, you do me the favor of offering me a pistol. Thanks. I must decline it. This generosity is not through any regard for me. You only wish to avoid the scandal of my trial, and the disgrace which can not fail to reflect upon your name." The comte was about to reply. "Permit me," interrupted Noel imperiously. "I do not choose to kill myself; I wish to save my life, if possible. Supply me with the means of escape; and I promise you that I will sooner die than be captured. My last thousand-franc note was nearly all gone the day when—you understand me. Therefore, I say, give me some money."

"Never!"

"Then I will deliver myself up to justice, and you will see what will happen to the name you hold so dear!" The comte, mad with rage, rushed to his table for a pistol. Noel placed himself before him. "Oh, do not let us have any struggle," said he coolly; "I am the strongest." M. de Commarin recoiled. "Let us end this," he said in a tremulous voice, filled with the utmost contempt; "let us end this disgraceful scene. What do you demand of me?"

"I have already told you, money, all that you have here. But make up your mind quickly."—"I have eighty thousand francs here," he replied.—"That's very little," said the barrister; "but give them to me. I will tell you though that I had counted on you for five hundred thousand francs. If I succeed in escaping my pursuers, you must hold at my disposal the balance, four hundred and twenty thousand francs. Will you pledge yourself to give them to me at the first demand? At that price, you need never fear hearing of me again."

By way of reply, the comte opened a little iron chest imbedded in the wall, and took out a roll of bank-notes, which he threw at Noel's feet. "Will you give me your word," Noel continued, "to let me have the rest whenever I ask for them?"—"Yes."—"Then I am going. Do not fear, they shall not take me alive. Adieu, my father! in all this you are the true criminal. but you alone will go unpunished. Ah, heaven is not just. I curse you!"

When, an hour later, the servants entered the comte's room, they found him stretched on the floor with his face against the carpet, and showing scarcely a sign of life.

On leaving the Commarin house, Noel staggered up the Rue de l'Universite. It seemed to him that the pavement oscillated beneath his feet, and that everything about him was turning round. His mouth was parched, his eyes were burning, and every now and then a sudden fit of sickness overcame him. But, at the same time, strange to relate, he felt an incredible relief, almost delight. It was ended then, all was over; the game was lost. The fever which for the last few days had kept him up failed him now; and, with the weariness, he felt an imperative need of rest. For a moment he had serious thoughts of giving himself up, in order to secure peace, to gain quiet, to free himself from the anxiety about his safety. But he struggled against this dull stupor, and at last the reaction came, shaking off this weakness of mind and body. The consciousness of his position, and of his danger, returned to him. He foresaw, with horror, the scaffold, as one sees the depth of the abyss by the lightning flashes. "I must save my life," he thought; "but how?" That mortal terror which deprives the assassin of even ordinary common sense seized him. He began running in the direction of the Latin Quarter without purpose, without aim, running for the sake of running, to get away, like Crime, as represented in paintings, fleeing under the lashes of the Furies. He very soon stopped, however, for it occurred to him that this extraordinary behavior would attract attention. He walked along, instinctively repeating to himself: "I must do something." But he was so agitated that he was incapable of thinking or of planning anything. The police were seeking him, and he could think of no place in the whole world where he would feel perfectly safe. He was near the Odeon theatre, when a thought quicker than a flash of lightning lit up the darkness of his brain. It occurred to him that as the police were doubtless already in pursuit of him, his description would soon be known to every one, his white cravat and well-trimmed whiskers would betray him as surely as though he carried a placard stating who he was. Seeing a barber's shop, he hurried to the door; but, when on the point of turning the handle, he grew frightened. The barber might think it strange that he wanted his whiskers shaved off, and supposing he should question him! He passed on. He soon saw another



barber's shop, but the same fears as before again prevented his entering.

Gradually night had fallen, and, with the darkness, Noel seemed to recover his confidence and boldness. Why should he not save himself? He could go to a foreign country, change his name, begin his life over again, become a new man entirely. He had money, and that was the main thing. And, besides, as soon as his eighty thousand francs were spent, he had the certainty of receiving, on his first request, five or six times as much more. He was already thinking of the disguise he should assume, and of the frontier to which he should proceed, when the recollection of Juliette pierced his heart like a red-hot iron. Was he going to leave without her, going away with the certainty of never seeing her again? Was it possible? For whom then had he committed this crime? For her. Who would have reaped the benefits of it? She. Was it not just, then, that she should bear her share of the punishment? "She does not love me," thought the barrister bitterly; "she never loved me. She would be delighted to be forever free of me. Juliette is prudent; she has managed to save a nice little fortune. Grown rich at my expense, she will take some other lover. The voice of prudence cried out to him: "Unhappy man! to drag a woman along with you, and a pretty woman too, is but to stupidly attract attention upon you, to render flight impossible, to give yourself up like a fool."—"What of that?" replied passion. "We will be saved, or we will perish together. If she does not love me, I love her; I must have her! She will come, otherwise—"

But how to see Juliette, to speak with her, to persuade her. To go to her house was a great risk for him to run. The police were perhaps there already. "No," thought Noel; "no one knows that she is my mistress. It will not be found out for two or three days; and, besides, it would be more dangerous still to write."

He took a cab, and told the driver the number of the house in the Rue de Provence. Stretched on the cushions of the cab, lulled by its monotonous jolts, Noel passed involuntarily in review the events which had brought on and hastened the catastrophe. Just one month before, ruined, at the end of his expedients, and absolutely without resources, he had determined, cost what it might, to procure money, so as to be able to continue to keep Madame Juliette, when chance placed in his

hands Comte de Commarin's correspondence. Not only the letters read to old Tabaret, and shown to Albert, but also those which, written by the comte when he believed the substitution an accomplished fact, plainly established it. He believed himself the legitimate son, but his mother soon undeceived him, told him the truth, proved it to him by several letters she had received from Widow Lerouge, called on Claudine to bear witness to it, and demonstrated it to him by the scar he bore. Noel resolved to make use of the letters all the same. He attempted to induce his mother to leave the comte in his ignorance, so that he might thus blackmail him. But Madame Gerdy spurned the proposition with horror. Then the barrister made a confession of all his follies, showed himself in his true light, sunk in debt; and finally begged his mother to have recourse to M. de Commarin. This also she refused. It was then that the idea of murdering Claudine occurred to him. The unhappy woman had not been more frank with Madame Gerdy than with others, so that Noel really thought her a widow. Therefore, her testimony suppressed, who else stood in his way? Madame Gerdy, and perhaps the comte. He feared them but little. If Madame Gerdy spoke, he could always reply: "After stealing my name for your son, you will do everything in the world to enable him to keep it." But how do away with Claudine without danger to himself?

After long reflection, the barrister thought of a diabolical stratagem. He burned all the comte's letters establishing the substitution, and he preserved only those which made it probable. These last he went and showed to Albert, feeling sure, that, should justice ever discover the reason of Claudine's death, it would naturally suspect him who appeared to have most interest in it. Not that he really wished Albert to be suspected of the crime; it was simply a precaution. His plan was simply this: the crime once committed, he would wait; things would take their own course, there would be negotiations, and ultimately he would compromise the matter at the price of a fortune. His plan settled, he decided to strike the fatal blow on the Shrove Tuesday. To neglect no precaution, he that very same evening took Juliette to the theatre, and afterward to the masked ball at the opera. In case things went against him, he thus secured an unanswerable alibi. The loss of his overcoat only troubled him for a moment. On reflection, he reassured himself, saying: "Pshaw! who will ever know?" Everything had resulted in

accordance with his calculations; it was, in his opinion, a matter of patience.

But when Madame Gerdy read the account of the murder, the unhappy woman divined her son's work, and, in the first paroxysms of her grief, she declared that she would denounce him. He was terrified. A frightful delirium had taken possession of his mother. One word from her might destroy him. Putting a bold face on it, however, he acted at once and staked his all.

To put the police on Albert's track was to guarantee his own safety, to insure to himself, in the event of a probable success, Count de Commarin's name and fortune. Circumstances, as well as his own terror, increased his boldness and his ingenuity. Old Tabaret's visit occurred just at the right moment. Noel knew of his connection with the police, and guessed that the old fellow would make a most valuable confidant. So long as Madame Gerdy lived, Noel trembled. In her delirium she might betray him at any moment. But when she had breathed her last, he believed himself safe. He thought it all over, he could see no further obstacle in his way; he made sure he had triumphed.

And now all was discovered, just as he was about to reach the goal of his ambition. But how? By whom? What fatality had resuscitated a secret which he had believed buried with Madame Gerdy? But where is the use, when one is at the bottom of an abyss, of knowing which stone gave way, or of asking down what side one fell?

The cab stopped in the Rue de Provence. Noel leaned out of the door, his eyes exploring the neighborhood and throwing a searching glance into the depths of the hall of the house. Seeing no one, he paid the fare through the front window, before getting out of the cab, and, crossing the pavement with a bound, he rushed upstairs. Charlotte, at sight of him, gave a shout of joy.

"At last it is you, sir!" she cried. "Ah, madame has been expecting you with the greatest impatience! She has been very anxious."

Juliette expecting him! Juliette anxious!

The barrister did not stop to ask questions. On reaching this spot, he seemed suddenly to recover all his composure. He understood his imprudence; he knew the exact value of every minute he delayed there. "If any one rings," said he to Char-

lotte, "don't open the door. No matter what may be said or done, don't open the door!"

On hearing Noel's voice, Juliette ran to meet him. He sharply pushed her back into the drawing-room, and followed, closing the door. Only then did she notice her lover's face. He was so changed, his look was so haggard that she could not help crying out: "What is the matter with you?"

Noel made no reply; he advanced toward her and took her hand. "Juliette," he demanded in a hollow voice, fixing his burning glance upon her, "Juliette, be sincere, do you love me?"

She guessed, she instinctively felt that something extraordinary was happening; she seemed to breathe an atmosphere of evil, yet she playfully replied, pouting her lips most provokingly: "You naughty boy, you deserve—"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Noel, stamping his feet fiercely. "Answer me," he continued, squeezing her pretty hands almost sufficiently to crush them, "yes, or no, do you love me?"

A hundred times had she played with her lover's anger, delighting to excite him into a fury, to enjoy the pleasure of appeasing him with a word, but she had never seen him thus before. He had hurt her very much, and yet she dared not complain of this his first harshness.

"Yes, I love you," she stammered, "do you not know it? Why do you ask me?"

"Why?" replied the barrister, releasing her hands; "why? Because, if you love me you have an opportunity of proving it. If you love me, you must follow me at once, abandon everything. Come, fly with me. Time presses—"

The young woman was decidedly frightened. "Great heavens!" she asked, "what has happened?"

"Nothing, except that I have loved you too much, Juliette. When I found I had no more money left to give you for your luxury, your caprices, I went mad. To procure money, I—I committed a crime—a crime; do you understand? The police are after me, I must fly, will you come with me?"

Juliette's eyes grew wide with astonishment; but she doubted Noel. "A crime? You?" she began.

"Yes, I! Would you know the truth? I have committed murder, I have assassinated! But it was all for you."

The barrister felt that at these words Juliette would certainly recoil from him in horror. He expected her to be seized by that terror which a murderer inspires. He was already fully

resigned to it. He thought that she would fly from him; perhaps there would be a scene. She might go into hysterics, cry out, call for help, for the police. He was mistaken. With a bound, Juliette threw herself upon him, entwining her arms about his neck, and embracing him as she had never done before.

"Yes, I love you!" she cried. "You have committed a crime for my sake, you? Then you must have loved me. You have a heart. I did not know you!"

It cost dear to inspire passion in Madame Juliette; but Noel did not think of that. He experienced a moment of intense delight; it seemed to him that nothing was hopeless. But he had the presence of mind to free himself from her embrace. "Let us go," he said; "the one great misfortune is that I do not know from whence the attack may come. How the truth has been discovered is still a mystery to me."

Juliette suddenly recollected the strange visit she had received in the afternoon; she understood it all. "Oh, wretched woman that I am!" she cried, wringing her hands in despair; "it is I who have betrayed you! It occurred on Tuesday, did it not?"

"Yes, Tuesday."

"Ah, then I have told all, without suspecting it, to your friend, that old fellow I thought you had sent, M. Tabaret!"

"What, Tabaret has been here?"

"Yes, this afternoon."

"Come, then," cried Noel, "come quickly; it's a miracle that he has not yet come to arrest me!"

He took her by the arm, to hurry her away; but she quickly released herself. "Wait," said she. "I have some money, some jewels. I must take them."

"It is useless. Leave everything behind. I have a fortune, Juliette; let us fly!"

She had already opened her jewel-box, and was throwing everything of value that she possessed pell-mell into a little traveling bag.

"Ah, through your delay I shall be caught," cried Noel, "I shall be caught!"

He spoke thus; but his heart was overflowing with joy: "What sublime devotion! She loves me truly," he said to himself; "for my sake, she renounces her happy life without hesitation; for my sake, she sacrifices all!"

Juliette had finished her preparations and was hastily tying on her bonnet, when the door-bell rang.

"It is the police!" cried Noel, becoming, if possible, even more livid.

The young woman and her lover stood as immovable as two statues, with great drops of perspiration on their foreheads, their eyes dilated, and their ears listening intently. A second ring was heard, then a third.

Charlotte appeared, walking on tiptoe. "There are several," she whispered; "I heard them talking together."

Grown tired of ringing, they knocked loudly on the door. The sound of a voice reached the drawing-room, and the word "law" was plainly heard.

"No more hope!" murmured Noel.

"Don't despair," cried Juliette; "try the servants' staircase!"

"You may be sure they have not forgotten it."

Juliette went to see, and returned dejected and terrified. She had distinguished heavy footsteps on the landing, made by some one endeavoring to walk softly. "There must be some way of escape!" she cried fiercely.

"Yes," replied Noel, "one way. I have given my word. They are picking the lock. Fasten all the doors, and let them break them down; it will give me time."

Juliette and Charlotte ran to carry out his directions. Then Noel, leaning against the mantelpiece, seized his revolver and pointed it at his breast. But Juliette, who had returned, perceiving the movement, threw herself upon her lover, but so violently that the revolver turned aside and went off. The shot took effect, the bullet entered Noel's stomach. He uttered a frightful cry. Juliette had made his death a terrible punishment; she had prolonged his agony. He staggered, but remained standing, supporting himself by the mantelpiece, while the blood flowed copiously from his wound.

Juliette clung to him, trying to wrest the revolver from his grasp. "You shall not kill yourself," she cried, "I will not let you. You are mine; I love you! Let them come. What can they do to you? If they put you in prison, you can escape. I will help you, we will bribe the jailers. Ah, we will live so happily together, no matter where, far away in America where no one knows us!"

The outer door had yielded; the police were now picking the lock of the door of the antechamber.

"Let me finish!" murmured Noel; "they must not take me alive!"

And, with a supreme effort, triumphing over his dreadful agony, he released himself, and roughly pushed Juliette away. She fell down near the sofa. Then he once more aimed his revolver at the place where he felt his heart beating, pulled the trigger and rolled to the floor. It was full time, for the police at that moment entered the room. Their first thought was that before shooting himself, Noel had shot his mistress. They knew of cases where people had romantically desired to quit this world in company; and, moreover, had they not heard two reports? But Juliette was already on her feet again.

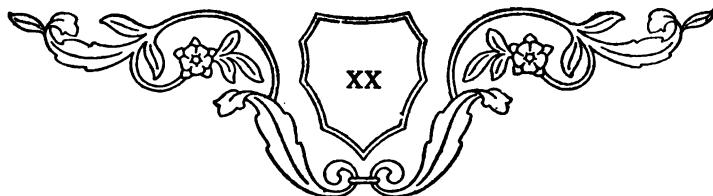
"A doctor," she cried, "a doctor! He can not be dead!"

One man ran out, while the others, under old Tabaret's direction, raised the body and carried it to Madame Juliette's bedroom, where they laid it on the bed. "For his sake, I trust his wounds are mortal!" murmured the old detective, whose anger left him at the sight. "After all, I loved him as though he were my own child; his name is still in my will!"

Old Tabaret stopped. Noel just then uttered a groan and opened his eyes. "You see that he will live!" cried Juliette. The barrister shook his head feebly, and for a moment he tossed about painfully on the bed, passing his right hand first under his coat and then under his pillow. He even succeeded in turning himself half-way toward the wall and back again. Upon a sign, which was at once understood, some one placed another pillow under his head. Then, in a broken, hissing voice, he uttered a few words: "I am the assassin," he said. "Write it down, I will sign it: it will please Albert. I owe him that at least."

While they were writing, he drew Juliette's head close to his lips. "My fortune is beneath the pillow," he whispered. "I give it all to you." A flow of blood rose to his mouth; and they all thought him dead. But he still had strength enough to sign his confession and to say jestingly to M. Tabaret: "Ah, ha, my friend, so you go in for the detective business, do you! It must be great fun to trap one's friends in person! Ah, I have had a fine game; but with three women in the play I was sure to lose."

The death struggle commenced, and, when the doctor arrived, he could only announce the decease of M. Noel Gerdy, barrister.



SOME months later, one evening, at old Mademoiselle de Goello's house, the Marquise d'Arlange, looking ten years younger than when we saw her last, was giving her dowager friends an account of the wedding of her granddaughter Claire, who had just married the Vicomte Albert de Commarin. "The wedding," said she, "took place on our estate in Normandy, without any flourish of trumpets. My son-in-law wished it; for which I think he is greatly to blame. The scandal raised by the mistake of which he had been the victim, called for a brilliant wedding. That was my opinion, and I did not conceal it. But the boy is as stubborn as his father, which is saying a good deal; he persisted in his obstinacy. And my impudent granddaughter, obeying beforehand her future husband, also sided against me. It is, however, of no consequence; I defy any one to find to-day a single individual with courage enough to confess that he ever for an instant doubted Albert's innocence. I have left the young people in all the bliss of the honeymoon, billing and cooing like a pair of turtle-doves. It must be admitted that they have paid dearly for their happiness. May they be happy then, and may they have lots of children, for they will have no difficulty in bringing them up and in providing for them. I must tell you that, for the first time in his life, and probably for the last, the Comte de Commarin has behaved like an angel! He has settled all his fortune on his son, absolutely all. He intends living alone on one of his estates. I am afraid the poor dear old man will not live long. I am not sure that he has entirely recovered from that last attack. Anyhow, my grandchild is settled, and grandly too. I know what it has cost me, and how economical I shall have to be. But I do not think much of those parents who hesitate at any pecuniary sacrifice when their children's happiness is at stake." The marquise forgot, however, to state that, a week before the wedding, Albert freed her from a very embarrassing position, and had discharged a considerable amount of her debts.



Since then she had not borrowed more than nine thousand francs of him; but she intends confessing to him some day how greatly she is annoyed by her upholsterer, by her dressmaker, by three linen drapers, and by five or six other tradesmen. Ah, well, she is all the same a worthy woman: she never says anything against her son-in-law.

Retiring to his father's home in Poitou after sending in his resignation, M. Daburon has at length found rest; forgetfulness will come later on. His friends do not yet despair of inducing him to marry.

Madame Juliette is quite consoled for the loss of Noel. The eighty thousand francs hidden by him under the pillow were not taken from her. They are nearly all gone now though. Before long the sale of a handsome suite of furniture will be announced.

Old Tabaret, alone, is indelibly impressed. After having believed in the infallibility of justice, he now sees everywhere nothing but judicial errors. The ex-amateur detective doubts the very existence of crime, and maintains that the evidence of one's senses proves nothing. He circulates petitions for the abolition of capital punishment, and has organized a society for the defense of poor and innocent prisoners.

THE END

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